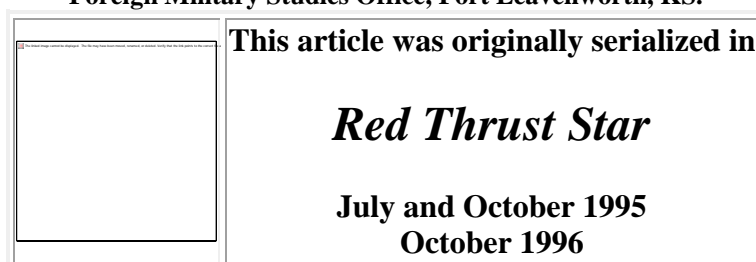

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High-desert Ambush: Hard Lessons Learned the Hard Way

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Afghanistan is not Europe, yet the Soviet Army that occupied Afghanistan in late December 1979 was trained to fight NATO on the northern European plain. Consequently, the Soviet Army had to reequip, reform and retrain on-site to fight the insurgent *mujahideen* [holy warrior] guerrillas. The Soviets were forced to revise their tactics and tactical methodologies in order to meet the demands of this very different war. One of the tactical areas which the Soviets thoroughly revised was the conduct of ambushes. The Soviets planned to use ambushes in the European theater, but they were primarily ambushes against attacking or withdrawing NATO armored columns. The Soviets constructed most of their ambushes around tanks and tank units. They planned to employ concealed individual tanks, tank platoons and tank companies along high-speed avenues of approach or withdrawal to engage the enemy from the flank and then to depart. Such ambushes were part of security zone defensive planning as well as planning for the deep battle and pursuit.¹ The Soviets also trained their squad and platoon-sized reconnaissance elements to conduct dismounted ambushes to capture prisoners and documents. They employed a command element, a snatch group and a fire support group in these small-scale ambushes.²

In Afghanistan, the *mujahideen* seldom used armored vehicles and seldom advanced along high-speed avenues of approach. Instead, they infiltrated light-infantry forces through some of the most inhospitable terrain on the planet to mass for an attack or ambush. The Soviets soon discovered that they had difficulty maintaining control of the limited road network which constituted the Soviet lines of communication. The guerrillas constantly cut the roads and ambushed convoys carrying material from the Soviet Union to the base camps and cities in Afghanistan. The Soviet ability to maintain its presence in the country depended on its ability to keep the roads open and much of the Soviet combat was a fight for control of the road network. During the war, the guerrillas destroyed over 11,000 Soviet trucks (and reportedly even more Afghan trucks) through ambush.³ The Soviets learned from *mujahideen* ambushes and used the ambush to interdict the guerrilla supplies coming from Pakistan and Iran. The Soviets conducted ambushes mainly with reconnaissance and other special troops (airborne, air assault, spetsnaz⁴ and elements

from the two separate motorized rifle brigades which were designed as counter-guerrilla forces). The composition and employment of ambush forces differed with the units involved and the part of Afghanistan in which they were employed.

Veterans of the Soviet-Afghanistan War recorded their combat successes and failures while they were students at the Frunze Academy. The following vignettes are their stories:⁵

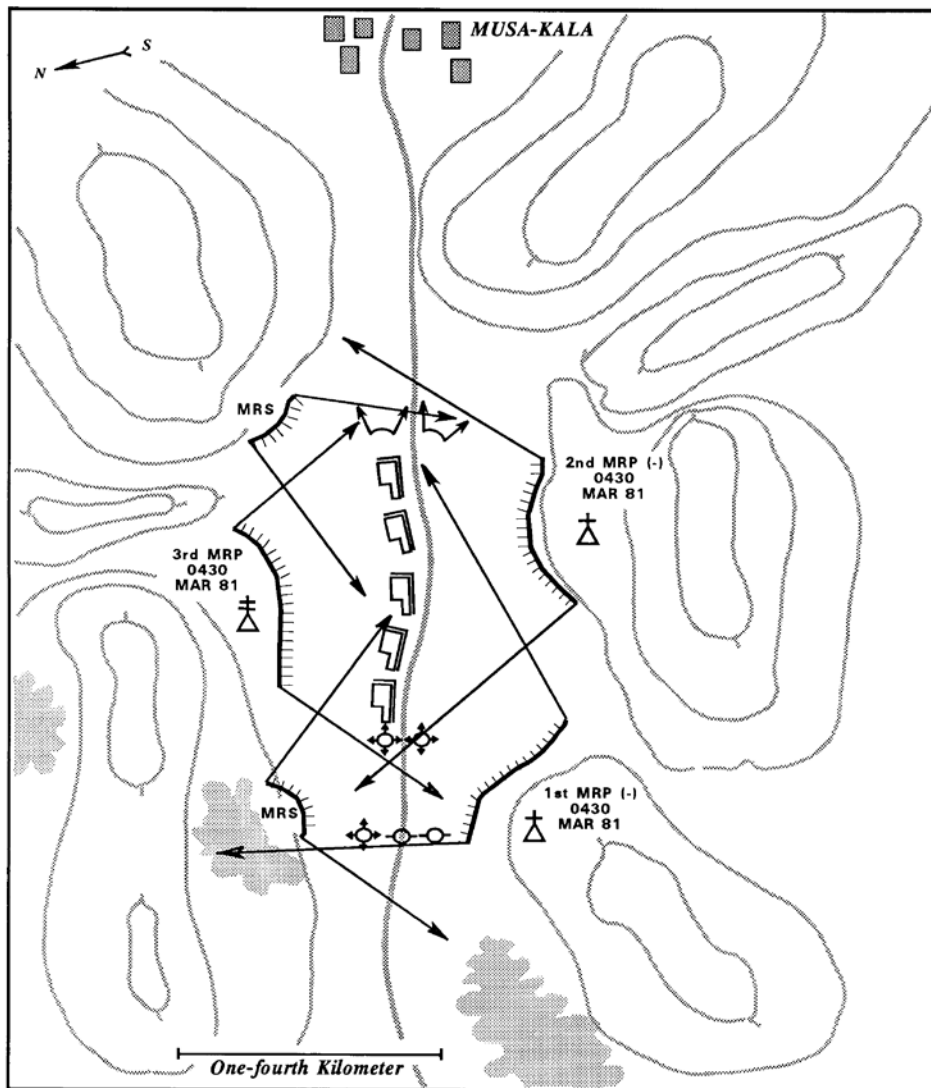
***A reinforced motorized rifle company conducts an ambush in
Kandahar province*** (Map 1) by Major V. I. Pavlenko⁶

Our separate motorized rifle brigade completed its road march to its new base camp in March 1981. Its movement was covered from the air by a squadron of helicopter gunships. At the same time, the squadron began reconnaissance of enemy forces located along the Kandahar-Shindand road.

The squadron commander reported that at 1820 hours, a truck convoy carrying supplies entered Musa-Kala village. Further, a number of enemy was concentrated at Musa-Kala, which is located about 20 kilometers from Kandahar. The brigade intelligence officer also confirmed this information.

We could not waste any time. The village of Musa-Kala is located close to the border with Pakistan and was a rest stop and a staging point for the *mujahideen* bases. Weapons and ammunition were brought through this village for distribution throughout the country. Our brigade commander, LTC Yu. p. Shatin, devised the following plan. He would seal off the village from the north and the southeast with two motorized rifle battalions. Then he would use the air-assault battalion and some Afghan Army subunits to sweep the village. At the same time, in order to halt the northwest movement of the enemy convoy, he would fly a reinforced motorized rifle company ahead of the convoy to establish an ambush.

My battalion commander, S. V. Antonov, designated my 8th Motorized Rifle Company as the ambush company. I was a Senior Lieutenant at the time and the company commander. My brigade commander personally gave me my mission. My company had three motorized rifle platoons. The brigade commander reinforced my company with three AGS-17 automatic grenade launchers with their crews, three sappers with twenty mines, and two RTOs with two radios. Seven Mi-8T transport helicopters were to deliver my company close to the ambush site. I had two hours to prepare my force for the mission.



Map 1

At 2055 hours, my company was loaded on the helicopters and at 2130 hours we landed five kilometers from the ambush site. The landing took place 15 minutes before dusk. After the landing, I assembled my company at the rally point which was located 500 meters from the LZ. We waited for the cover of darkness before moving out. I pushed out a patrol squad in front of the company. I had each platoon split into two groups and move side-by-side in two columns where they could be controlled by hand signs and visual signals. I had a patrol move in front of and behind each platoon. I had every squad and platoon conduct all-around observation and stop periodically to get their bearings. At 0020 hours, my forward patrol reported that they were at the ambush site and 20 minutes later, my entire company had closed into the area. I put my platoons and squads into position. I placed forces to block the entrance and exit to the ambush site and concentrated the bulk of my force in the center of the ambush site. All-around observation was maintained on the site entrance and exit while my troops dug

in and fortified their firing positions and then camouflaged them. The sappers mined the road at the ambush site. By 0430 hours, my company ambush was ready.

At 0500 hours, brigade subunits sealed off the village of Musa-Kala and began the sweep at 0530. The enemy, shooting at the Soviet forces in the village in order to slow them down, put their ammunition-truck convoy on the road and headed toward our ambush. At 0620 hours, my sentry reported that five trucks were approaching the site. The trucks entered the site and the lead truck hit a mine. The 1st and 3rd platoons immediately opened fire on the enemy. Two trucks turned around and tried to leave. We killed one with a command detonated mine and the 2nd platoon killed the other. The enemy was confused and his return fire was wild and disorganized. Some of the *mujahideen* tried to break out, but we cut them down. The battle was short.

The results of our ambush were 26 enemy killed and 20 captured. Eight of the captives were wounded. We destroyed five trucks loaded with ammunition and food. I lost one soldier KIA and five WIA.

FRUNZE COMMENTARY: The success of this combat was determined by the rapid decision to employ the ambush; the short time taken to organize the action; the rapid, concealed movement into the ambush site; the initiative and bravery displayed by all commanders, the uninterrupted control of the subunits and their fires, and the support and continual coordination with the subunits which were carrying out the block and sweep of the village.

AUTHOR'S COMMENTARY: This particular ambush seems to set the conditions for fratricide. Forces on low ground are positioned across from forces on high ground. The forces on the high ground fired through the convoy and maybe into friendly forces. The account states that the *mujahideen* return-fire was wild and disorganized, yet the Soviets lost one killed and five wounded. Some of these Soviet casualties were probably from fratricide. Further, if the *mujahideen* had entered the ambush at night, the force on the low ground would have fired into the force on the high ground, since night firing is inevitably high unless bars and elevation blocks are constructed at each firing position. These field firing aids are hard to put in at night.

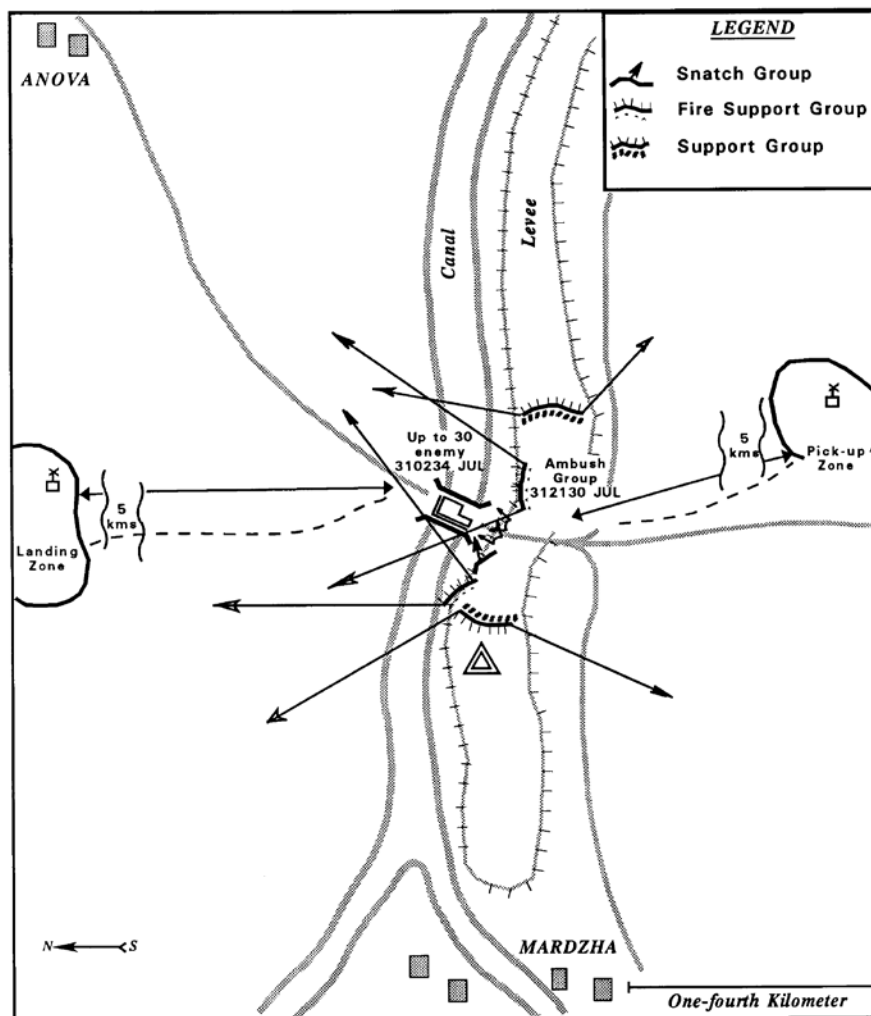
Although this ambush worked, there are still some troublesome details. There was apparently no control on traffic entering the kill zone from the west and inadvertently setting off a mine, spoiling the ambush. Further, the use of conventional mines on the road takes control away from the ambush commander. If the *mujahideen* had sent a patrol vehicle ahead of the main convoy, it might have triggered a mine and ruined the ambush. Command-detonated mines seem appropriate here.

An airborne group ambushes a bridge site

(Map 2) by LTC V. P. Gladishev⁷

Weapons and ammunition that were furnished to the *mujahideen* came into Afghanistan from Pakistan and Iran. Much of this cargo came into Helmand and Kandahar provinces. Our airborne division commander decided to establish ambushes along the likely routes that these armament caravans would travel. In July 1982, my battalion commander ordered me to prepare a reconnaissance group to carry out such a mission.

I had ten days to select and prepare a twenty-man group for the mission. I selected battalion officers, sergeants and soldiers who were in exceptional physical shape, and had combat experience. My group consisted of two officers, a warrant officer, five sergeants and twelve soldiers. The soldiers included two RTOs, two sappers, a medic and an interpreter. I also received an officer from the Afghan KHAD to accompany the mission. My group's equipment included six machine guns, fourteen AKS-74 assault rifles, and an AKMS automatic rifle with a silencer. We carried two combat loads per weapon, four hand grenades per man, four RPG-18 antitank weapons, five mines, seven radios (two of which could link with helicopters), seven pair of binoculars, one night vision device, and a flak jacket for every man. The group wore camouflage smocks and tennis shoes. Our target was a bridge over which, according to Afghan counterintelligence, enemy trucks, motorcycles and tractors had crossed on previous nights. At the end of July 1982, my group boarded two Mi-8TV helicopters. We were inserted some five kilometers from the bridge one hour prior to sunset. Four Mi-24 helicopter gunships covered our insertion. The insertion was timed to allow the helicopters to return to the battalion base camp during daylight. We waited for darkness and then moved stealthily to the bridge. My patrol, which moved 200 meters in front of the group, discovered an enemy observation post which consisted of two men, military rifles and a motorcycle. We slipped around their observation post and surreptitiously moved to the bridge. There, we split into our designated subgroups and deployed according to my plan. My ambush subgroups were a fire support group, a security group, a snatch group and a support group. By 2130 hours, my ambush was established and my troopers were ready for battle.



Map 2

Every 15-20 minutes, the enemy sentries would signal the nearby villages with some flashlight signals. From this, I understood that they had not discovered our presence. This continued until 0230 hours. According to our plan, I had to withdraw my ambush force and start moving to the pick-up zone at 0300 hours. However, at 0235 hours, a medium truck moved from Anova toward Mardzha and was crossing the bridge. I gave the command to detonate two MON-50 mines and to open fire. Simultaneously, two troopers from my security force threw grenades into the enemy OP.

The enemy never got a shot off and it was all over in one or two minutes. The enemy was completely destroyed. After the snatch group and the fire support group ceased fire, we gathered enemy weapons, ammunition and documents. We killed 28 enemy, captured 32 weapons of varying types as well as their ammunition. I had no casualties. We quickly reassembled and moved out to the pick-up zone. The helicopters had us back to our base camp by 0700 hours.

From the end of July to the end of September, we conducted eighteen similar ambushes. We had positive results from fourteen of them. During this time, we had three soldiers

wounded. Our ambush groups killed approximately 200 *mujahideen* and captured about 20. We captured approximately 200 various weapons, a large amount of ammunition, and a large sum of money. There were about 50,000,000 Iranian rials, Pakistani rupees and Afghanistan afghans. This money was destined to pay for their Iranian and Pakistani advisers.

FRUNZE COMMENTARY: The successful accomplishment of all these ambushes was due to the careful selection of the personnel for the mission, the well-thought-out training, the clearly defined duties during the organization of the ambushes, the detailed coordination between the subgroups, the superb physical conditioning of the troopers and the use of specialized clothing and shoes.

AUTHOR'S COMMENTARY: The Soviets did not stress unit integrity to the same degree as in the west. Time and again, scratch units were assembled without any apparent regard for maintaining unit integrity and habitual relationships. This ambush group was apparently drawn from throughout the battalion.

A motorized rifle platoon conducts an ambush in the area of Aibak

(Map 3) by Major V. N. Popov⁸

The 3rd Motorized Rifle Battalion secured the road between the town of Tashkurgan and Aibak. A pipeline ran through the battalion's area of responsibility, bringing fuel from the USSR to the Republic of Afghanistan. The battalion's mission was to prevent attacks on the pipeline, insure the uninterrupted movement of truck convoys, and to safeguard and defend important facilities within our area of responsibility.

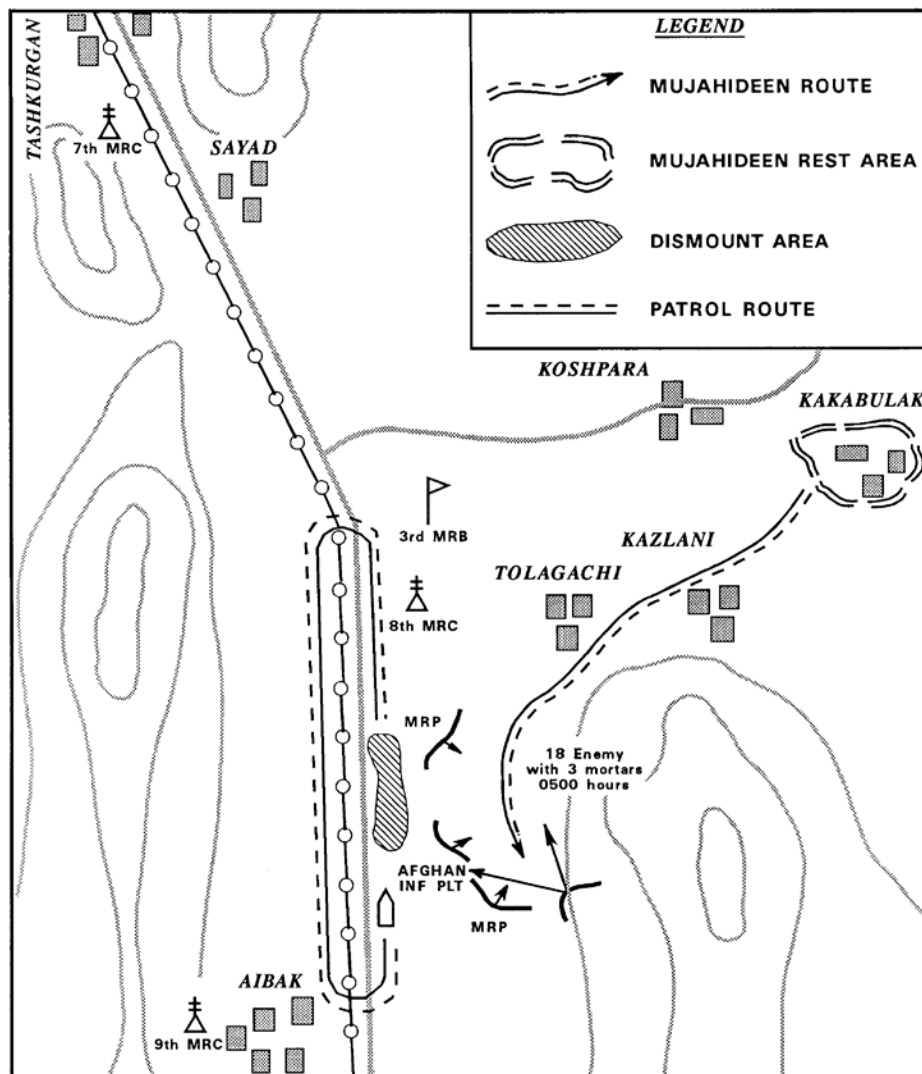
In April 1984, the city of Aibak was subjected to systematic enemy mortar fire. Their main target was the 9th Motorized Rifle Company which was garrisoned there. The constant enemy shelling interfered with the company's ability to perform its missions and damaged civilian property and created panic. We tried to destroy the enemy with our artillery, but these attempts failed. The enemy knew his terrain like the back of his hand. He would fire five to eight mortar rounds and then change firing positions so that he would not be caught under our return fire.

Agent intelligence reported that the group of eight to ten men who conducted the mortar attacks on Aibak had left for the village of Kakabulak to rest and replenish their ammunition supply. The group would be resting there for two days. We knew the route that the *mujahideen* would use. The 3rd MRB commander decided to ambush this route with a platoon backed by the rest of the 8th MRC.

The battalion commander decided to establish an ambush site at night before the *mujahideen* returned west. The 8th MRC, mounted on BTRs, would support the ambush site with direct fire if necessary and would provide the ambush platoon. The ambush platoon would be reinforced with an AGS-17. In order to deceive the enemy, we conducted our reconnaissance in the Aibak area and coordinated our actions with the Afghan subunits.

The ambush platoon's mission was to dismount from moving vehicles which were conducting a patrol along the pipeline and, at the turnoff point, walk to the ambush site, occupy the site, and eliminate the enemy.

The 7th MRC, which was located about 40 kilometers away, would provide the site and training for the ambush platoon from the 8th MRC. The company commander trained this 8th MRC platoon for the mission on a piece of ground that was similar to the actual ambush site. On the first day of training, several alternate courses of action were devised depending on the way that the *mujahideen* would approach the ambush site. In the event that the enemy discovered the ambush, the commanders coordinated their plans so that the rest of the 8th MRC would provide fire support to their ambush force. The platoon paid careful attention to coordinating the actions between the fire support group and the snatch group. It also worked out procedures for dismounting from the moving BTRs. On the second day, the troops prepared their weapons and equipment for combat. In the afternoon, the platoon rejoined the 8th MRC.



Map 3

The platoon moved to the ambush area on two BTRs of the 8th MRC. We normally used two BTRs for conducting road patrols. At 2100, the *bronegrupp*a set out on patrol.² At

2230 hours, as the patrol was coming to an end, the personnel of the ambush group started jumping out of the moving BTRs. They lay spread out in a ditch along a 500 meters stretch of the road waiting for the platoon leader's signal. They lay there for thirty minutes until the platoon leader knew that they had not been discovered. Then he gave the signal for the platoon to assemble. He sent out two patrols in front of the platoon and they all moved to the ambush site. The platoon took four hours to get to the site. At 0230 hours, they arrived at the site some three kilometers east of Tolagachi. After putting his platoon into their firing positions, the platoon leader fine-tuned the missions of each group on the ground. At the appointed time, the platoon leader "broke squelch" twice on his radio set to signal the battalion commander that the ambush was ready for battle. At 0500, we saw the enemy approach. The platoon leader let their forward patrol pass through the site and waited for their main body. When the main body came into the kill zone, we called out and demanded that they surrender. The *mujahideen* did not surrender, but began firing small arms at U.S.. Their fire was intense. The battle began. The platoon leader immediately reported the events to the battalion commander by radio. The battalion chief of staff led the 8th MRC to blocking positions to prevent the enemy withdrawal and to support the ambush party. As the fire fight raged, the *mujahideen* realized that they were in a trap and tried to breakout of the encirclement. However, the 8th MRC arrived at that point and blocked their exit route. Close coordination between the ambush party and their supporting MRC insured that the enemy did not escape. We killed 14 enemy and captured four more. We also captured three mortars, plus small arms and ammunition. We had three WIA.

FRUNZE COMMENTARY: The positive points of this example are the training given to the soldiers on a site similar to the actual site, but at a place removed from enemy observation, the development of variants of the ambush plan for the ambush party, and the undetected movement of the subunit to the ambush site. On the other hand, they did not develop a variant plan to deal with a possible larger force than they expected. Further, it is not always a good idea to demand that your enemy surrender. Surprise, sudden, close-range fire demoralizes an enemy and significantly lessens your own casualties.

AUTHOR'S COMMENTARY: This is a successful ambush by a regular motorized rifle force. But, true to form, the platoon employed is from the 7th MRC--which has a secondary reconnaissance mission. The platoon's mission was to kill or capture the enemy force. Why they would challenge the enemy and demand their surrender is puzzling. Their specific mission did not require prisoners, and yet, if they wanted prisoners, combat experience shows that there are usually prisoners (wounded or otherwise) left at the end of any ambush. There seems to be no reason to challenge the enemy and lose surprise. To challenge a force that is roughly equal in size seems foolhardy and a risk to your own force.

***A motorized rifle company conducts an ambush
in the Loy-Karez region*** (Map 4) by Major A. V. Van'yants¹⁰

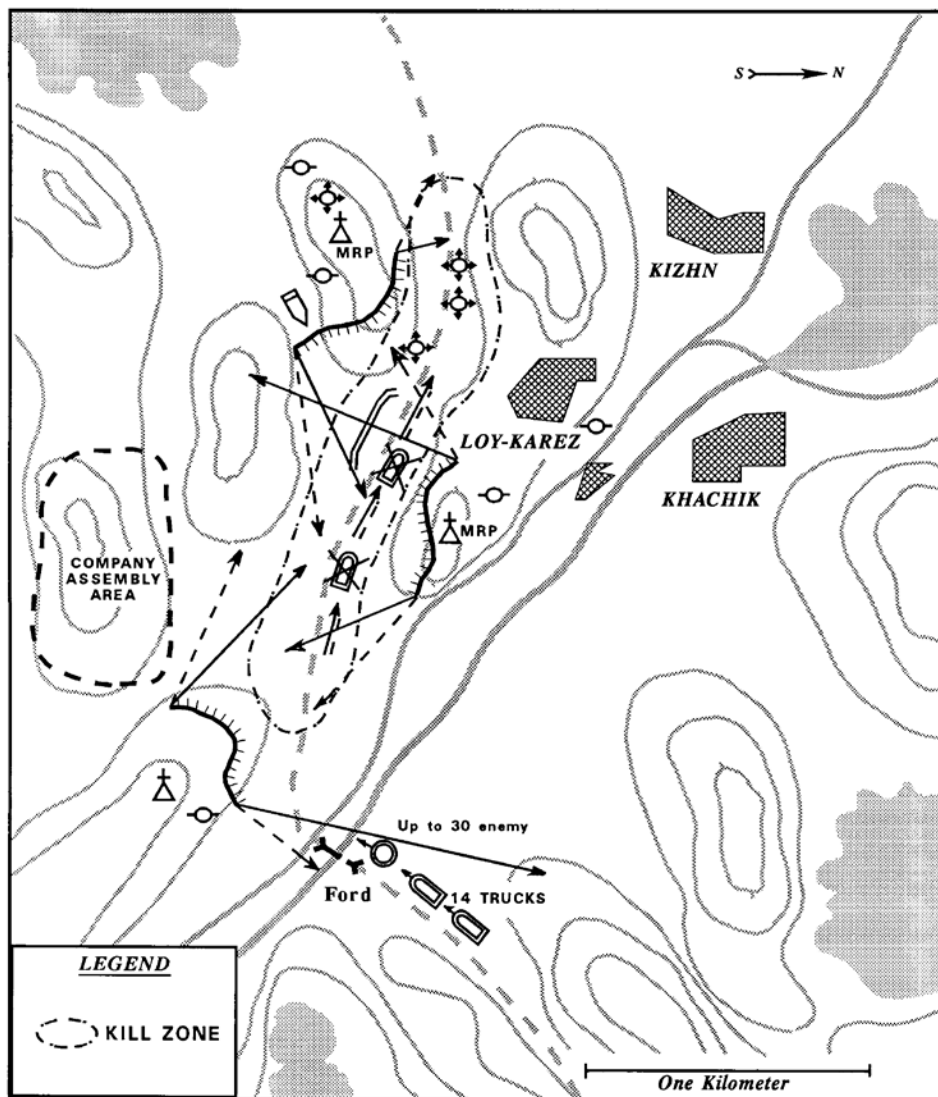
During the time that Soviet forces served in Kandahar province, guerrilla forces systematically attacked convoys, pillaged the local population, torched schools and attempted to seize Kandahar city.

The 2nd Motorized Rifle Battalion of a separate motorized rifle brigade was garrisoned in the city of Kandahar. This battalion was the most experienced and combat-hardened subunit of the brigade and had participated in all the brigade operations. The battalion was particularly skilled in ambush techniques and was equally adept at moving to the ambush site on helicopters or on our assigned BMPs.

We prepared for ambushes in a very exacting and thorough fashion. We would prepare and check our personnel, their weapons and gear, and the night-vision devices. In the event that the ambush would involve a helicopter insertion, the battalion commander or his chief of staff would personally train the ambush party. We selected the soldiers and sergeants for our helicopter-borne ambush groups based on their superior physical conditioning, their combat experience, and their skill with various types of weapons and communications equipment. When we travelled to the ambush site on our BMPs, we took everyone in the subunit.

On 12 June 1984, my fully-equipped motorized rifle company moved on BMPs to the Loy-Karez region to conduct ambushes. Captain V. Patrushev, the battalion chief of staff, was in charge of the mission. My company was divided into four ambush groups. One of these groups moved to a small river to block a fording site. The ambush group commander gave his orders, organized his lookouts and put the rest of the soldiers to work digging their firing positions.

After 0200 hours on 13 June, the look-outs spotted truck headlights as a truck drove down from the heights. In a few minutes, a thirteen-truck convoy followed the lead truck. They stopped about 300 meters from the fording site. With our night-vision device, we could see about 30 dismounted *mujahideen* moving in a cautious manner into our ambush site. The *mujahideen* observed the area carefully. The group commander decided to withdraw since the enemy action would preclude a successful ambush, the enemy force outnumbered the ambush force by 30 to 14 and the BMPs were seven kilometers away from the ambush site and unable to provide fire support.



Map 4

At dawn, the ambush party arrived at the company assembly area. They posted look-outs and the personnel rested. After some time, one of the lookouts reported that the *mujahideen* were in a nearby valley strung-out in a column and heading our way. It appeared that the enemy had set out to search for our ambush party, for they had found the ambush site where our ambush party had concealed themselves at night. Our former ambush site was strewn with our tin cans, cigarette butts and empty cigarette packages. Apparently the *mujahideen* thought that only ten to fifteen men were in the area. I ordered one of my platoons to deploy near the company assembly area in ambush and prepare for battle. I ordered the two other platoons to move stealthily to the flanks of the *mujahideen* using the terrain folds to hide their movement. We waited for the enemy to move onto the large plain on the valley floor, so we could complete the encirclement. At the right moment, I called for a pair of helicopter gunships to come to our assistance and gave the order to open fire.

We killed 28 *mujahideen*, and captured 32 weapons, including three grenade launchers. We also captured valuable documents and Islamic official seals. My company had no casualties.

FRUNZE COMMENTARY: The ambush was successful for the following reasons: the thorough reconnaissance of the enemy forces and terrain; the precise planning of the group's actions; the skillful siting of the company in ambush using the terrain features; the uninterrupted and resolute control of the subunits during the fight; and the support of helicopter gunships.

AUTHOR'S COMMENTARY: The Soviet Army seldom left a clean bivouac area or fighting position. They dug field latrines, but the troops were as likely to defecate and urinate around their area as to use the latrines. Trash was strewn everywhere. Apparently this sloppiness extended to their ambush sites and alerted the *mujahideen* to their presence. In this case, however, there apparently was not enough trash to reveal the true size of the ambush force and the company commander turned this to his advantage.

More disturbing than the trash is the fact that the ambush party was smoking in position. Even if the smokers were smoking under a poncho or tarp, cigarette smell carries—particularly in the damper, cooler night air. Russian cigarettes are strong and pungent. This demonstrates a basic lack of field sense or discipline.

Once again, the battalion commander or the battalion chief of staff were personally involved in training small groups. The lack of a professional NCO corps and the lack of trust in junior officers kept the battalion leadership doing jobs other armies would entrust to lieutenants and sergeants. As a result, other areas in the battalion suffered.

An airborne platoon conducts an ambush in Helmand Province

(Map 5) by Major A. A. Tolkachev^{[11](#)}

Our airborne battalion's mission was to control part of the frontier located some 300 kilometers southwest of the city of Kandahar. Based on intelligence reports furnished by the Afghan KHAD, my battalion commander decided to employ ambushes to attack the enemy.^{[12](#)}

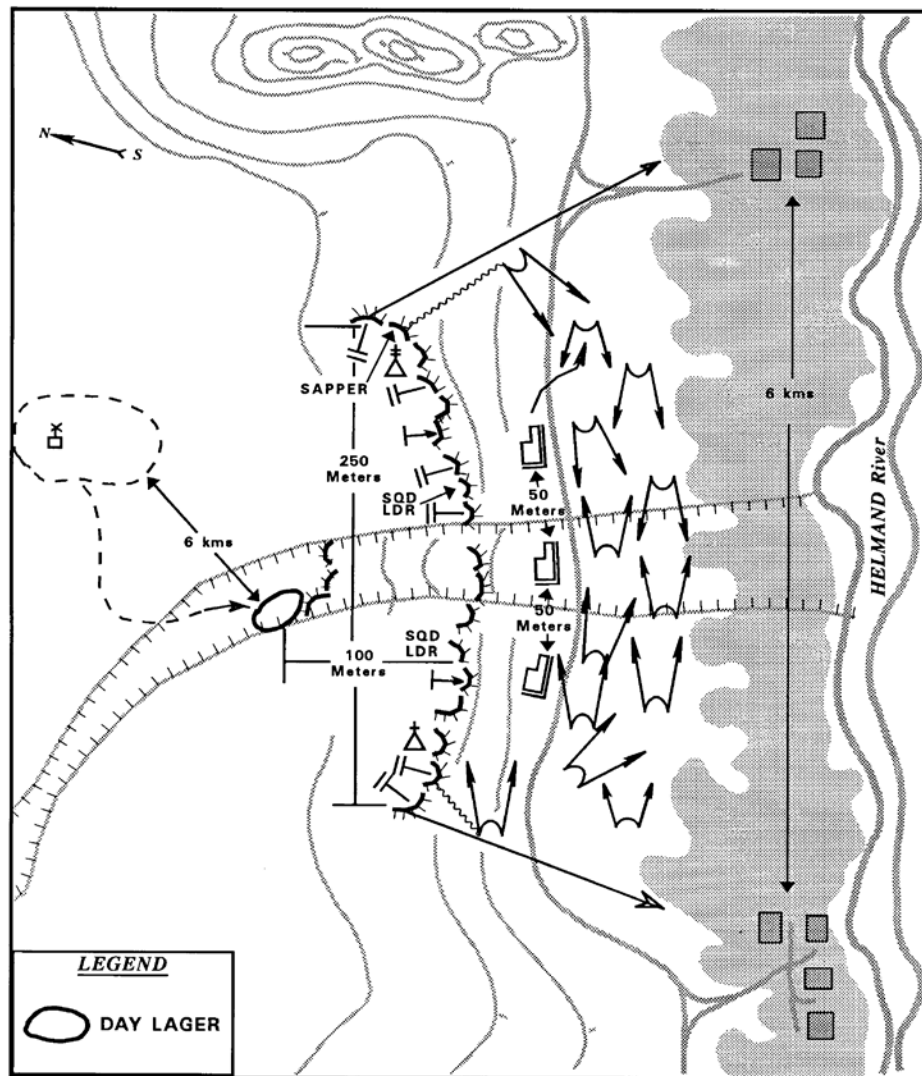
My ambush party was returning to our base camp by helicopter after conducting an ambush along the border. As we flew along the Helmand River, I discovered a road that skirted the green zone of the river. We dropped down to five or ten meters off the deck and I soon noticed fresh truck tracks. When we got back to our base camp to rest, I received information that a truck-mounted guerrilla force of about 50 men had arrived in our AO. I went to the battalion commander and suggested that I set up an ambush on the newly-discovered road.

My battalion commander told me to conduct an ambush in the area from 3 to 10 December 1984. My ambush party consisted of 25 men, two of which were officers. The force had three squads, each of which consisted of the squad leader and two three-man fire teams.

I picked out my ambush site independently as we flew to the area. The helicopters faked insertions at one false airhead with two phony LZs—one LZ some ten to twenty kilometers away from our LZ and the other five to six kilometers away from it. We landed before darkness.

I had rations and water for ten days. We took two days supply with us and buried and concealed the rest. Each man carried 35 to 40 kilograms of equipment. When night fell, we moved to our ambush site. When we came to the road, I personally selected the firing positions, organized sectors of fire, and specified how the positions were to be protected and concealed. Every soldier dug a prone firing position. They hauled the dirt away to a depression. Our two engineers laid in a mine field, using trip-wire and MON-100 command-detonated mines.¹³ Two-thirds of the force were in battle positions at night while one-third rested. During the day, I had three look-outs, while the remainder rested. There was no sign of the enemy during the first night. During the day, we defused the trip-wire mines, so that wild animals would not set off the mines and disclose our ambush.

Our ambush site was flat desert. I picked the sight since it was higher than the green zone and allowed us to observe for a distance in any direction. During the day we could see for three to five kilometers, while at night, we could detect a truck with its headlights burning twenty to twenty-five kilometers out. We could hear a truck when it was three to five kilometers away.



Map 5

On the next day, a shepherd drove a large herd of sheep through the area between the green zone and our minefield. Later, a nomad with three camels came through. Neither man discovered our ambush. I fed my force twice a day in the "day lager" located in the depression. They received a meal in the morning when they came off ambush and in the evening before they went back to their positions. I gave each soldier a liter of water every twenty-four hours. Nothing happened during the first two nights. The next morning, I sent the platoon leader with several soldiers to our rations and water cache to replenish our on-site supply.

On 5 and 6 December, we had a sand storm, but finally on the evening of the 6th, the wind calmed down. Suddenly on the night of 6 and 7 December, we heard the sounds of truck engines. I gave the command "To Battle". The men got their weapons ready and cocked their RPG-18s. After 30 minutes, three ZIL-130 heavy-duty trucks¹⁴ and two light-trucks approached the site. Their lights were off. When all the trucks were in the kill

zone, I detonated two mines, which was the signal to open fire. The platoon leader and I controlled the fire and used illumination flares and tracer rounds to adjust and shift the fire. All the trucks were hit by RPG-18 and small-arms fire within the first minute. One truck, which had tried to turn around and exit the ambush was destroyed by a mine. The enemy personnel were surrounded by burning, exploding ammunition. When they tried to get away from it, we cut them down. In this action, the enemy lost 44 KIA and three truck-loads of weapons, ammunition and gear. My group had no casualties.

FRUNZE COMMENTARY: The airborne subunit enjoyed success as a result of the correct, skillful organization of the ambush; the well-constructed and camouflaged firing positions; the skillful employment of mines; the use of close fire; and the control of night fire by an officer using illumination flares and tracer ammunition.

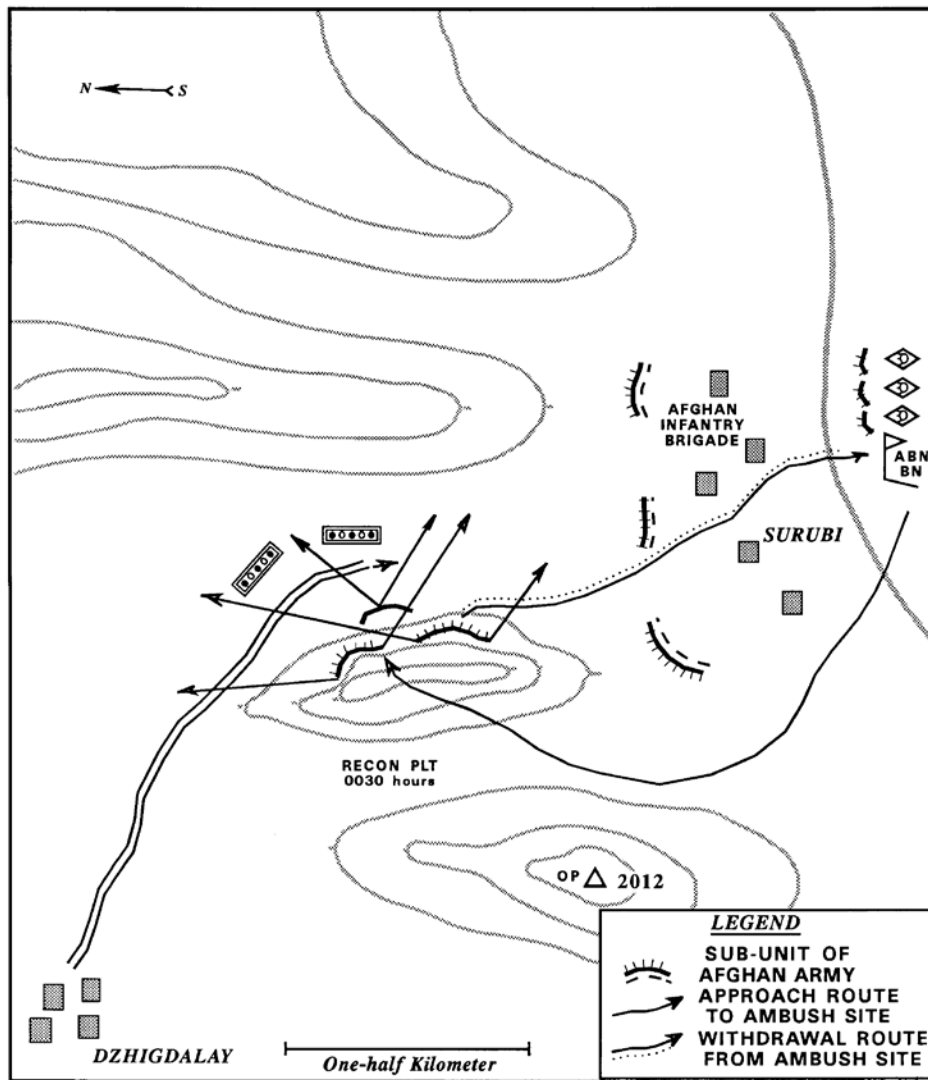
AUTHOR'S COMMENTARY: The force went out for seven days with rations for ten. They stayed in the same spot with the same routine for four days before they had contact. Local inhabitants had been through the area, and although the commander was sure that they had not been detected, that possibility existed. Is it a good idea to remain in the same position for so long, or is this a good way to set up a force for counter-ambush?

***A reinforced reconnaissance platoon conducts an ambush
northwest of Surubi*** (Map 6) by Major I. V. Solonin¹⁵

In December 1985, *mujahideen* activity increased in the provinces of Kabul, Kandahar and Takhar. Caravans moved increasing amounts of arms, ammunition and war supplies from Pakistan to the guerrilla forces. In order to stop this anti-government activity by the *mujahideen*, the high command decided to conduct ambushes in its areas of responsibility.

I was the commander of an airborne battalion. Together with my battalion chief of staff and my battalion chief of reconnaissance, I received our orders to conduct ambushes. We

worked to prepare our subunits and to prepare an ambush plan in an organized manner.



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Map 6

A guerrilla force was active in the battalion AOR. Our AOR was centered on the village of Surubi, some 50 kilometers east of Kabul on the Kabul-Jalalabad highway. The guerrillas kept pressure on the local populace by forcibly kidnapping them and taking them to Pakistan, attacking government officials, blowing up electric power lines, attacking convoys, and shelling our base camps with launch bombs. KHAD intelligence, with whom we maintained close contact, reported the movement of weapons caravans from Pakistan to the Pandshir Valley. Their reports described how these caravans passed through the battalion AOR. Further KHAD reports described how the *mujahideen* routinely came from Dzhigdalay to Surubi to scout our garrison and commit acts of terror.

I decided to conduct ambushes on possible *mujahideen* routes located five kilometers northwest of Surubi. I selected the battalion reconnaissance platoon, an airborne platoon, and engineer squad and an AGS-17 crew for the ambush. This was a total ambush force of 23 personnel. We trained the force to react to all possible combat scenarios. We prepared the force in secret, under the guise of routine training. Self-propelled mortars would support the ambush.

At dusk one evening in the second half of December, the reinforced reconnaissance platoon, commanded by Captain V. p. Bobrov, moved to the ambush site. There was difficulty in getting there since the ambush party had to skirt an Afghan Army security position.¹⁶ We did not tell our Afghan neighbors about our ambush, since we wanted to safeguard the fact that we were conducting an ambush and prevent the leakage of information.

At 0030 hours, I received a radio message that the platoon had arrived on site and occupied their positions. The engineers mined the possible *mujahideen* escape routes. They also emplaced a command-detonated mine. The ambush was positioned on the slope of a hill overlooking a path. The ambush force was positioned in two tiers. The snatch group occupied the first tier, while the support group was located 50 meters higher and occupied the second tier. The site was in constant radio communications with battalion. Nothing happened the first night. During the day, the personnel were concealed in a hide position and only lookouts stayed in the fighting positions. Additionally, the battalion OP on hill 2012 provided warning.

When night fell again, the ambush party reoccupied their positions. At 2345 hours, the ambush party saw a dark silhouette approach on the path from Dzhigdalay. They let him pass through, since they thought that he was a patrol. This was a variant that we had considered and trained against. The man returned and disappeared back down the path to Dzhigdalay. At 0300 hours, the ambush party saw eleven armed men approach. The platoon leader decided to capture the force. The force entered the kill zone, and after a short, intense fight, five *mujahideen* were killed and six were captured. The ambush party quickly started to withdrew by a different path. At that time, all the Afghan Army security posts were notified that the reconnaissance platoon was returning through their positions. At 0520 hours, the platoon returned to the battalion base camp. We had no casualties.

When the captured *mujahideen* were interrogated, they showed us a large weapons and ammunition cache in Surubi. Further, the prisoners gave us information which allowed us to prevent an attempt against the Surubi hydroelectric station.

FRUNZE COMMENTARY: This combat experience shows that conducting a successful ambush is very hard work. Up to 90% of our ambushes were without result. There were several reasons for this. First, our units did not always get to the ambush site undetected. Second, the high command issued regulations on ambushes which specified that no fewer than 25 men had to go on every ambush and that every ambush must contain heavy crew-served weapons. These precautions were not always justified. The composition of every ambush party depended on the actual situation. Third, regulations require an inordinate number of radio reports--departure for the ambush site, arrival at the ambush site, readiness of the ambush site for battle, hourly radio checks and the return of the subunit. As a result, the enemy discovered our intentions and did not move through these areas

during the time our ambushes were out. Equipment for ambush was a particular problem. Practically all the officers and soldiers equipment and uniforms were unsatisfactory in that they were uncomfortable and inhibited movement. Army boots are totally unsuited for ambushes. They are uncomfortable and too heavy for mountain climbing and the *mujahideen* could readily determine our ambush sites from our boot tracks.

AUTHOR'S COMMENTARY: The Soviets and Afghan government forces apparently did little to contest the *mujahideen* ownership of the night. Night patrols and ambushes were a singular planned event, not a routine mission. Battalions and companies moved into their bunkers at their base camps at night for protection from *mujahideen* mortar and rocket attacks. Consequently, *mujahideen* supply caravans routinely passed by base camps unmolested. Squad-sized ambushes were prohibited by 40th Army regulations, yet a platoon-sized ambush is frequently too cumbersome. The Soviets did not allow squad-sized ambushes in Afghanistan since their NCOs were not professional and perhaps not trusted. Yet, squad-sized ambushes, as well as platoon-sized ambushes, were part of the training program for Soviet forces not deployed in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, two officers usually accompanied every ambush. This successful ambush still did not accomplish its mission--the interception of supply caravans from Pakistan.

Two Vietnam innovations, the mechanical ambush and the "claymores and grenades only" ambush are not mentioned. The mechanical ambush, which uses claymore mines rigged with trip wires, takes control from the ambush-site commander, but leaves the ambush party undetected. The "command-detonated claymores and grenades only" ambush gives the commander control and leaves the ambush party undetected until the ambush party resorts to small-arms fire. The Soviets apparently did not employ these ambushes.

The Soviet desire for positive control at all times did generate an unnecessary number of radio reports. Radio security was not always practiced and when traffic was encoded, it was often sloppily done. As a result, the *mujahideen* were sometimes able to determine Soviet activities or intentions from radio traffic.

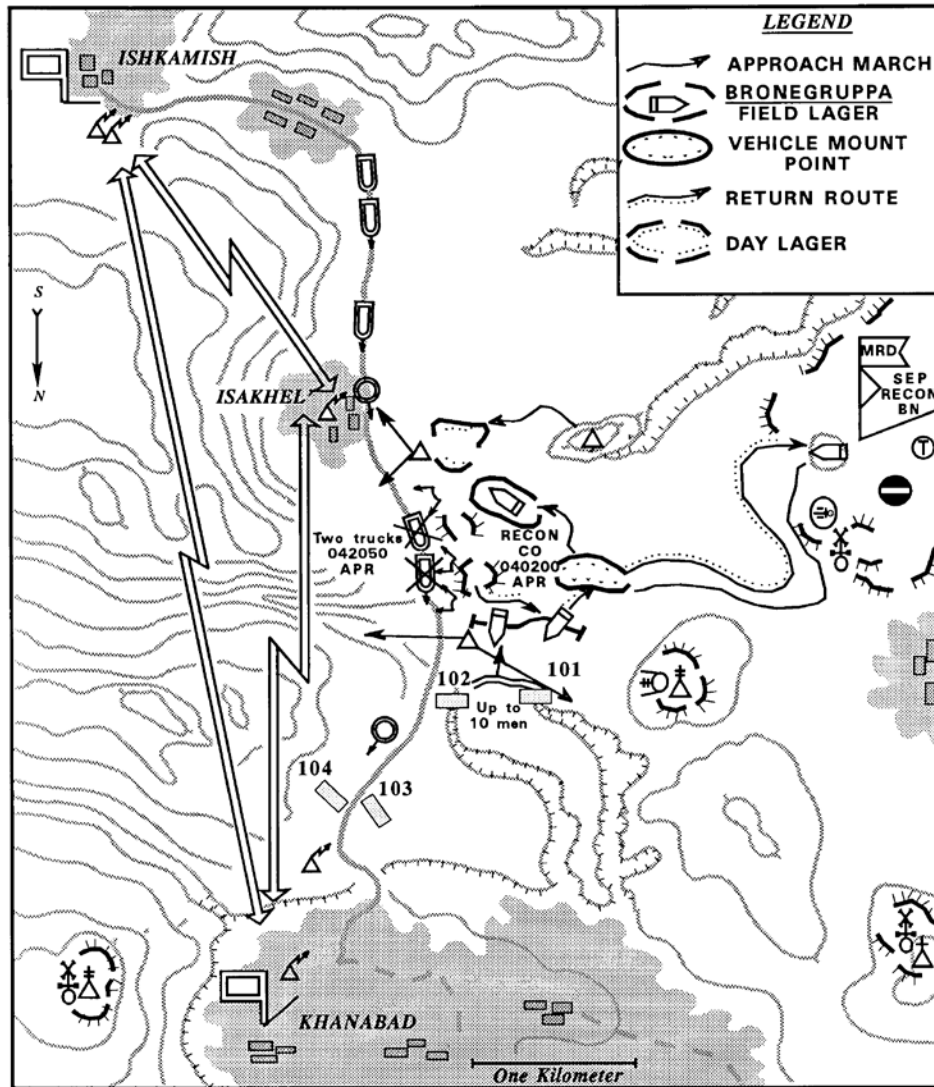
***Conducting ambushes on the basis of radio intercept data
in the area of Khanabad*** (Map 7) by LTC A. M. Tangaev¹⁷

At the beginning of March 1986, the enemy began to amass arms and ammunition in his bases near Ishkamish, located some 60 kilometers southeast of Kunduz. These armaments were intended for use by *mujahideen* subunits in the green zones of Kunduz and Khanabad. We received intelligence reports that four caravans carrying weapons and ammunition arrived at these bases in the middle of March.

After the arrival of these caravans in the enemy staging area, our radio interceptors began monitoring a wide range of radio traffic on the short wave and ultra-short wave bands. The radio traffic was encrypted in four-letter code groups. Part of the encoded radio text was broken by a higher headquarters. From a deciphered message, we determined that the enemy would transport arms and ammunition to Kunduz at the end of March, start of April. Based on this information, the division commander decided to conduct ambushes utilizing our separate reconnaissance battalion.

Preparations for the ambush began when the commander of the 1st Reconnaissance Company and the commander of the Radio and Electronics Reconnaissance Company

received their orders. The reconnaissance company commander was given the area of the future action, the mission, the composition of the ambush force, the reinforcements and the sequence of events for preparing his force for the ambush. The commander of the radio and electronics reconnaissance company was ordered to increase his radio-intercept efforts in the direction of Khanabad and Ishkamish and determine the enemy radio-traffic pattern during movement of caravans.



Map 7

The reconnaissance company commander and his platoon leaders rode to an outpost which was located five kilometers from the ambush site on the truck which normally delivered food to the outpost. They studied the terrain, the approach and withdrawal routes, and the probable enemy approach route. The company commander left one platoon leader behind to observe the area at night and returned, with the other platoon leaders, to the company base camp. During training for the ambush, the company conducted a systematic tactical exercise¹⁸ on terrain similar to that of the ambush site.

The troops cleaned their weapons and drew ammunition and supplies for the ambush. On 2 April, the company stood a formal lay-out inspection to check the company's readiness for the ambush.

Radio-intercept and agent reconnaissance reported that the enemy moved a caravan from Ishkamish to Khanabad from 2000 to 2200 hours on 2 April. The division chief of reconnaissance set the time to be ready to leave on ambush--1800 hours on 3 April.

The concept of the ambush was as follows: The 1st Reconnaissance Company would move out secretly at nightfall on 3 April to some ruins. They would establish two OPs and conceal the company. During the day, they would be in radio contact with the battalion, the radio and electronics reconnaissance company and the mortar battery. The company *bronegrupp*a would move to a field lager ready to advance rapidly to the ambush site and give it fire support. Then, on the evening of 4 April, the company would secretly occupy its firing positions and prepare to ambush the enemy. They would wait for a signal from the reconnaissance chief or the company commander of the radio and electronics reconnaissance company that the enemy had started to move a convoy. They would allow the enemy forward security patrol to pass through the ambush and then destroy the main body. When the *bronegrupp*a arrived, the ambush party would withdraw from the ambush site, mount the carriers and ride back to the base camp. There were 23 men in the ambush party. They carried three PK general-purpose machine guns, three RPK light machine guns, one 12.7 mm *utes* heavy machine gun, sixteen AK-74 assault rifles, and five mines. The *bronegrupp*a consisted of one BRDM and three BMP-2s. A mortar battery supported the company.

At 1900 hours on 3 April, the company set out for the ambush site on foot. They moved along a gully floor. Two patrols moved 50 to 60 meters in front of the main body and two patrols moved 40 meters behind it. By 0200 hours on 4 April, the company reached the ruins and established the Ops. The rest of the company moved to the day lager and concealed themselves.

AT 0530 hours on the 4th of April, radio interceptors detected a radio transmitter in Ishkamish talking to a radio transmitter in Khanabad. Traffic pattern analysis indicated the enemy was preparing to move a convoy. However, our observation posts saw nothing of the enemy during the day. By 1700 hours, our radio triangulation attempts had located several radio transmitters located along the Ishkamish-Khanabad approach. As night fell, the company occupied the ambush. The ambush consisted of two OPs, a support group, a security group and a snatch group.

At 2005 hours, two men walked down the road. Twenty minutes later, a division OP reported that a truck had entered the canyon with its lights on. He let it pass. Twenty minutes later, two trucks roared into the ambush area at the maximum possible speed. As they entered the kill zone, the company commander detonated a mine which was the signal for the support group to open fire. They destroyed both trucks. At the commanders' signal, the snatch group then moved into the kill zone to inspect the trucks and pick up any weapons and ammunition. As the *bronegrupp*a approached, the ambush party discovered a pocket of enemy who were moving toward the ambush. The ambush force cut down part of this group and the armored vehicle fire cut down the rest. The company then moved back to the mount-up site, loaded onto the carriers and rode back to our base camp.

Our ambush killed twelve *mujahideen*, and destroyed two trucks. We captured a lot of weapons and ammunition. The reconnaissance company had one soldier wounded.

FRUNZE COMMENTARY: The success of this ambush was due to the following factors: the use of intelligence generated by radio-intercept; the undetected deployment to the ambush site; the well-organized ambush on unfamiliar ground; the excellent employment of OPs, a support group, and a snatch group; the use of surprise; and the excellent combat training of the personnel. Further examination of the vignette, however, shows that the company commander could not adjust mortar fire effectively.

AUTHOR'S COMMENTARY: This is the second example of the use of a *bronegruppa* in an ambush. In the first example (vignette 3), the *bronegruppa* sneaks the ambush party closer to the ambush site. Then, the rest of the company mounts these vehicles. Later, when the Soviets spring the ambush, this mounted company drives to the ambush site to support by fire and cut off the enemy escape. In this vignette, the *bronegruppa* provides fire support from the same direction as the ambush party and provides a rapid, relatively safe exit for the ambush party. Since ambush parties are frequently counter-ambushed on their way back to base camp, this appears to be a reasonable solution.

This is an interesting example since it shows that presumably strategic code-breaking assets were used to break tactical encoded radio traffic. This emphasizes the importance that the Soviet high command placed on intercepting the *mujahideen* LOCs.

A reinforced motorized rifle company conducts an ambush to the northwest of Jalalabad (Map 8) by Major V. P. Podvorniy¹⁹

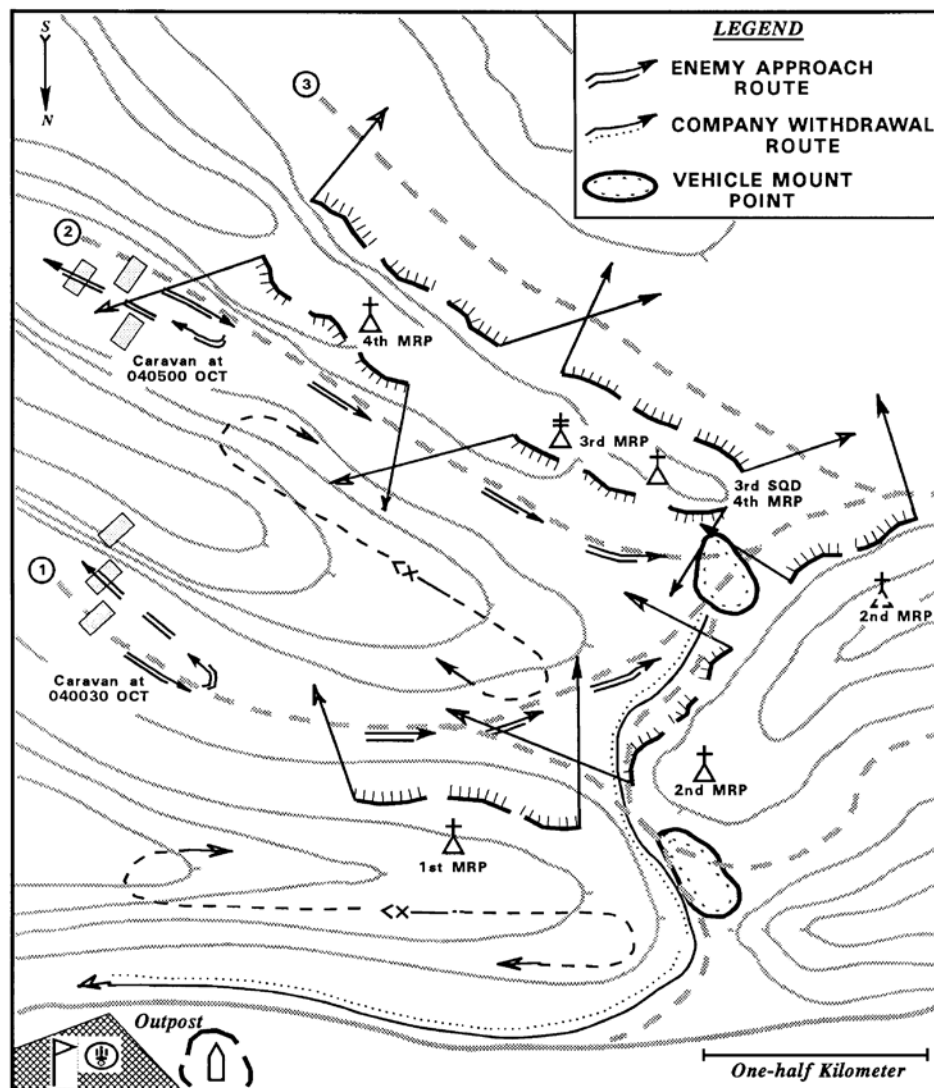
In the second half of 1986, the general situation in Kunar Province began to turn in favor of the Soviet forces. The ambushes conducted by our separate motorized rifle battalion in our AOR in Kunar Province were successful. The *mujahideen* had suffered appreciable losses which were causing him to improve his tactics for moving munitions and armaments by caravan through the area.

Beginning in 1986, Soviet ambushes that had contact with the enemy noticed that the *mujahideen* had noticeably beefed up the forward security element on his caravans and their actions when ambushed had become more precise. When the *mujahideen* detected our ambush force, his counteraction took two forms. If the *mujahideen* had superiority in personnel and weaponry, he would try to flank the Soviet ambush force and destroy it from the flank or rear. If the *mujahideen* lacked superiority, then, as a rule, they would go around the ambush site using an alternate route which would lead to cover.

We learned that platoon-sized ambushes were pointless. A proper ambush required a motorized rifle company, reinforced with a sapper subunit and supported by artillery fire. On the morning of 2 October, the 2nd MRC commander was directed to interdict the flow of *mujahideen* caravans along the road some 25 kilometers northwest of Jalalabad. The company had 96 men, 12 BTRs, and its TO&E weaponry. An artillery battery would support the company. The company would move to the ambush site in two stages. The dismounted company would hitchhike with a convoy from its base camp to the Soviet military outpost on the Jalalabad-Kabul highway. The convoy would go on to Kabul for cargo. The company BTRs would arrive later on their own. The company would stay in the outpost and depart at night on foot more than 24 hours prior to the time they would be

required to be at the ambush site. They would carry TO&E weapons, three combat loads of ammunition (one of these loads would stay on the BTRs), and three days of dry rations. They had to be ready to move out on the ambush mission by 0500 hours, 3 October.

The organization of combat activity in a separate motorized rifle battalion requires maintaining high combat readiness: one company was usually on combat duties, another company was on round-the-clock details and the third company was involved in combat and political training, but was kept ready for combat. At the time we received the ambush order, the 2nd MRC was in combat training, so we had them prepare to conduct the ambush. The training included: the organization of combat; personnel training in weaponry and mission accomplishment; political-educational work; and practical work by the battalion commander, his deputies and the chief of the operations section.



Map 8

The organization for combat included: the company commander's decision and his briefing it to the battalion commander; issuing orders to the platoon leaders; and working out coordination on a terrain model. Company preparations included: studying the assigned area of combat; training in the applications of tactical fire support and engineering relevant to mission accomplishment; conducting radio checks to insure that the radio sets are working; checking the night-vision devices; resting the personnel; and then reporting to the battalion commander that the company is ready for the mission. The practical work of the battalion commander, his deputies and his chiefs of services included: approving the company commander's plan; rendering assistance in coordination with the artillery battery and the supply and maintenance support to the company; issuing the battalion order on the departure of the company for combat; and conducting a full lay-down inspection of the company to check its readiness for combat.

At 0600 hours on 3 October, the company moved out secretly with the convoy to the outpost. When night fell, the company moved out by dismounted platoons to the ambush site. By 2300 hours, they were in ambush positions with overlapping and interconnected fields of fire. Their flanks and gaps were covered by minefields.

At 0300 hours 4 October, the forward security patrol for a *mujahideen* caravan moved down route #1. They moved through the kill zone of the 1st Platoon and in an hour were in the kill zone of the 2nd Platoon. This particular caravan stretched out over 1.3 kilometers. The company commander, having evaluated this situation, decided that the bulk of the caravan was located in front of the two platoons. Therefore, he gave the order to the 1st and 2nd Platoons to open fire while the artillery pounded the caravan rear guard. The majority of the *mujahideen* and their pack animals were destroyed, but a part of the caravan was able to withdraw.

At 0500 hours, the caravan again began moving, but this time on route #2. The enemy thought that, as was the rule, Soviet ambush forces were small groups and were unable to cover several routes simultaneously. Further, they knew that usually these small groups rapidly abandoned their ambush sites after they sprang the ambush.

When the caravan was in the kill zones of the 3rd and 4th Platoons, the company commander gave the order to open fire. Part of the *mujahideen* moved to the tail of the caravan and began to withdraw hurriedly. The company commander radioed the artillery in the outpost and ordered them to open fire on the withdrawing enemy. But five to seven minutes passed from the fire command to the start of the firing. By that time, the enemy was out of the impact area.

At dawn, the company commander called in the *bronegruppa* and helicopter gunships. When they arrived, he arranged a search of the destroyed caravans and gathered weapons, ammunition and supplies. At 0700 hours, the company loaded onto their BTRs and, under the cover of the helicopter gunships, returned to their base camp.

FRUNZE COMMENTARY: It proved advantageous, in this situation, to have a motorized rifle company with four motorized rifle platoons.²⁰ The company was able to cover three possible caravan routes simultaneously. After they destroyed a caravan on one route, they did not abandon their positions, but continued to perform their mission. As a result, the company destroyed yet another caravan on another route that same night. It follows that one should note the skillful organization of troop control by the company commander.

However, the combat revealed that the company commander could not quickly, correctly, precisely and clearly call in an artillery fire mission and adjust its fire.

AUTHOR'S COMMENTARY: Poor artillery adjustment by company-grade officers was a constant problem in Afghanistan. They solved this problem by putting Forward Observers (FOs) down to company and platoon level, but this was only a temporary answer. This suggests a training deficiency for what should be a universal skill for professionals.

It is a commander's call whether to leave forces in place after an ambush to guard supplies and weaponry left in the kill zone or to exit the ambush site. Any enemy who revisits the ambush site following the ambush is either unaware of the previous ambush or in sufficient strength to wipe out the ambush party. The force had night-vision devices and could also have called for battlefield illumination by the artillery in order to police up the first caravan and then shift to another site. The 2nd MRP had an alternate site planned, but did not move to occupy it.

In this incident, the *bronegruppa* did not have a direct fire mission in support of the ambush. Rather, it remained passively near the outpost until dawn.

In this region, guerrilla forces apparently moved in large groups and, consequently, platoon-sized ambushes were insufficient. Company-size ambushes are much harder to place and control and were probably a unique tactic of this border region.

A recon platoon conducts an ambush in enemy-controlled territory

(Map 9) by Major V. A. Stolbinskiy²¹

Our separate motorized rifle brigade was located some 40 to 50 kilometers from the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. In the middle of February 1987, we received orders to deny the delivery of weapons and ammunition from Pakistan to the guerrilla forces. Our brigade commander decided to use ambushes to stop caravans from transporting weapons, munitions, and military supplies to the central region of Afghanistan.

Our battalion controlled the northwest outskirts of Kandahar City. Intelligence reports made it clear that at the end of March, a large weapons caravan would travel along the road that connected the Rega Desert with Kandahar. This road ran through *mujahideen*-controlled territory. The battalion commander told me, an air-assault company commander, to prepare and lead the reconnaissance platoon in ambush. In the event that the recon platoon found the caravan, it would have air support.

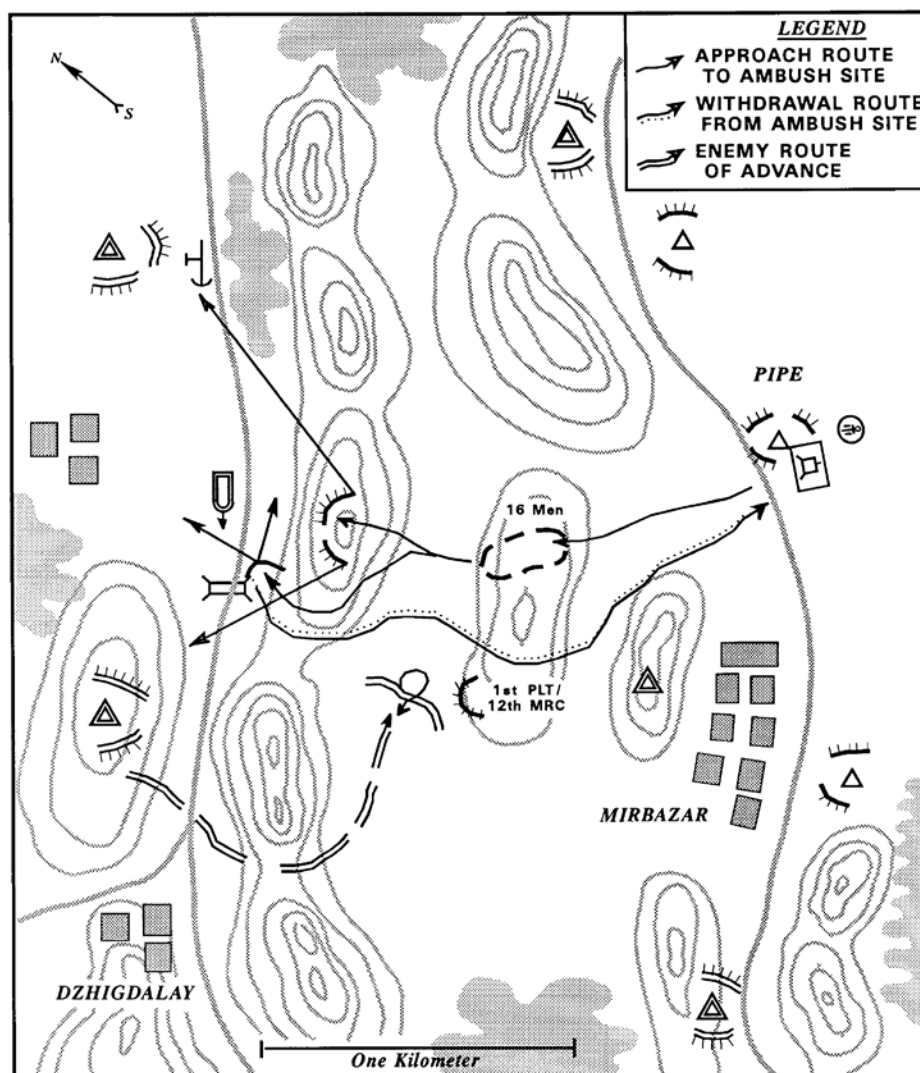
I went to the "Pipe" outpost with Senior Lieutenant A. N. Kholod, the platoon leader, Sergeant A. R. Babaev, and two scouts. From the outpost, we studied the *mujahideen*-controlled territory and plotted our approach route. The ambush party would have to cross three mountain ridges to get to the ambush site. According to intelligence, the *mujahideen* had several OPs which they manned around the clock, on the ridges closest to the outpost. The *mujahideen* used them to monitor Soviet movements. The "Pipe" outpost was held by the 12th MRC²², with a 122mm howitzer battery and a MRLS platoon.

After three weeks of close observation, the lookouts at "Pipe" outpost had found a *mujahideen* OP. After two more weeks, they discovered a second one. The OPs were located on the dominant heights about 1.5 kilometers apart. I decided to move my force

between these outposts on New Year's Eve night (by the Muslim calendar). My trip to the "Pipe" outpost helped me fine-tune my ambush plan and the approach route.

Usually, our battalion commander would report the time, coordinates and number of personnel in every ambush by radio to the higher staff. The majority of our ambushes were not successful. The enemy intercepted our radio messages, deciphered them and, in the best case, avoided our ambushes. In the worst case, the enemy would try to destroy our ambushing force. Since this ambush would be conducted deep in enemy territory, the battalion commander decided not to use the radio, but report the ambush details to the brigade commander in person.

The recon platoon trained for the ambush on a site similar to the actual one. Particular attention was given to training for crossing the mountains, coordination between groups and physical conditioning. Only the battalion commander, myself and the platoon leader knew the time and place of the ambush.



Map 9

The recon platoon moved to "Pipe" outpost a week before the ambush. In order to deceive the enemy, soldiers of the 12th MRC mounted the three BTRs of the recon platoon and returned to our battalion base camp. They did this in full view of the enemy Ops. At the outpost, the recon platoon was hidden from sight in dugouts. I let them come out only at night.

At 2330 hours on 20 March, the 26-man recon platoon, reinforced with an AGS-17 squad, moved out from the outpost toward the ambush site. A three-man patrol moved 30 meters in front of the main body. The platoon traveled in a single column. Some five kilometers from the ambush site, I left a 16-man group commanded by the Deputy Platoon Leader, Senior Sergeant R. A. Usmanov. Their job was to cover the withdrawal of our look-outs, snatch group and covering group. They hid in a cave which they closed from the inside with stones.

My ten-man group continued on. At 0200 hours 21 March, we reached the ambush site. There was no cover close to the road. However, after awhile, we found a road culvert for a dry creek bed. I decided to post five men in the culvert. I sent the remaining five men, with the AGS-17 and a PK machine gun to the high ground some 800 meters from the road on the withdrawal route. They were commanded by my squad leader, Sergeant V. A. Sukhanov. The group's missions were to watch for the enemy, and if necessary, support the snatch group by fire. Communications were by radio. The five men in the culvert were myself, Senior Lieutenant A. V. Kholod-the recon platoon leader, Private I. A. Dzhumaev-the translator, Sergeant A. N. Babaev, and a young machinegunner, Private A. N. Sivushkin.

When it became light, we could see that there were villages to the right and the left of the culvert. There was a field between the villages. At 0800 hours, armed people began to gather in the field. Sergeant Sukhanov reported that 140-150 people were there. The *mujahideen* began doing calisthenics. They finished these with running, crawling and other movements necessary in combat. All this took place 400 meters from the culvert. At 0900, Sergeant Sukhanov reported that the *mujahideen* had established guard posts on the road. The nearest posts were a kilometer left and right of the culvert where the snatch group sat. At 1000 hours, movement started on the road. In the culvert, we could hear the roar of the motors and the shouts of the people.

We stayed there for forty-eight hours without success. The caravan did not come. On the third day, I decided that we could not wait for the arrival of the caravan. I decided to capture one vehicle and return to the battalion. At noon, when it got really hot, the *mujahideen* usually quit training and went to the villages. I told Sergeant Sukhanov to tell me what was coming down the road. At noon, he reported that some armed bicyclists were coming down the road. I told Sergeant Sukhanov to keep reporting the distance of the bicyclists from the culvert. When they were at 20 meters, my group spilled out on the road and captured the *mujahideen*. They were not able to offer any resistance. We tied up our captives and pulled them and their bicycles into the culvert.

I then called Sergeant Sukhanov on the radio. He reported that a car was moving down the road at approximately 60 kilometers per hour. Eight motorcycles were about 1.5 kilometers behind the car. When Sergeant Sukhanov reported that the car was about 70 meters from the culvert, we again ran out onto the road and opened fire on it. We killed the driver instantly. The car coasted 40 meters further and stopped. Two *mujahideen* jumped out, but we cut them down instantly. We recovered weapons, four seals,

documents and money from the dead. We blew up the car with grenades and began to withdraw.

The motorcyclists pulled over and began firing on my snatch group. Sergeant Sukhanov's group opened up on them. *Mujahideen* began running out of the villages. Some got on motorcycles and tractors and tried to cut off our escape. I called artillery fire in on the enemy. The 1st Platoon of the 12th MRC moved to previously-selected positions and supported the withdrawal of the recon platoon.

We killed five *mujahideen* in the ambush. Among them was Oka, the leader of a large guerrilla force, and his adviser, Turan, a former Afghan Army captain. We captured weapons, documents and money. Private A. N. Sivushin was wounded in the shoulder.

FRUNZE COMMENTARY: In this vignette, special attention should be given to how the commander got his platoon into the area from which to move out on his ambush. This area was constantly observed by the enemy, so he deceived the enemy by smuggling his platoon into the security outpost, while members of a different subunit rode back on his BTRs to his base camp. The platoon moved on foot to the ambush site under the cover of darkness. This is also a fine example of excellent coordination between lookouts, the snatch group and the fire support group. Finally, the brave, daring and decisive actions during the assault need to be noted.

AUTHOR'S COMMENTARY: This is an interesting approach, but putting both officers in the snatch group is questionable. Granted that recon troops are better trained and motivated than the average, but these are conscript soldiers and NCOs. Who would take command and get the platoon out if the snatch group were destroyed? The support group was 800 meters from the snatch group. That is a long way to support and cover, particularly if it had to be done at night.

In Vietnam, American Army units put out ambushes every night on likely trails or where intelligence reports indicated likely activity would occur. In Afghanistan, the Soviets apparently conducted ambushes against specific intelligence and on an irregular basis. There does not appear to be any standard distance between a patrol and the main body for night dismounted movement. In vignette 7, the forward patrol is 50-60 meters out front, while the trail patrol is 40 meters behind. In other material, the patrol can be from 200 meters in front to a unspecific 20 minutes out front. In this vignette, the patrol is a mere 30 meters in front of the main body. This seems very close and seems to negate the advantage of having a forward patrol.

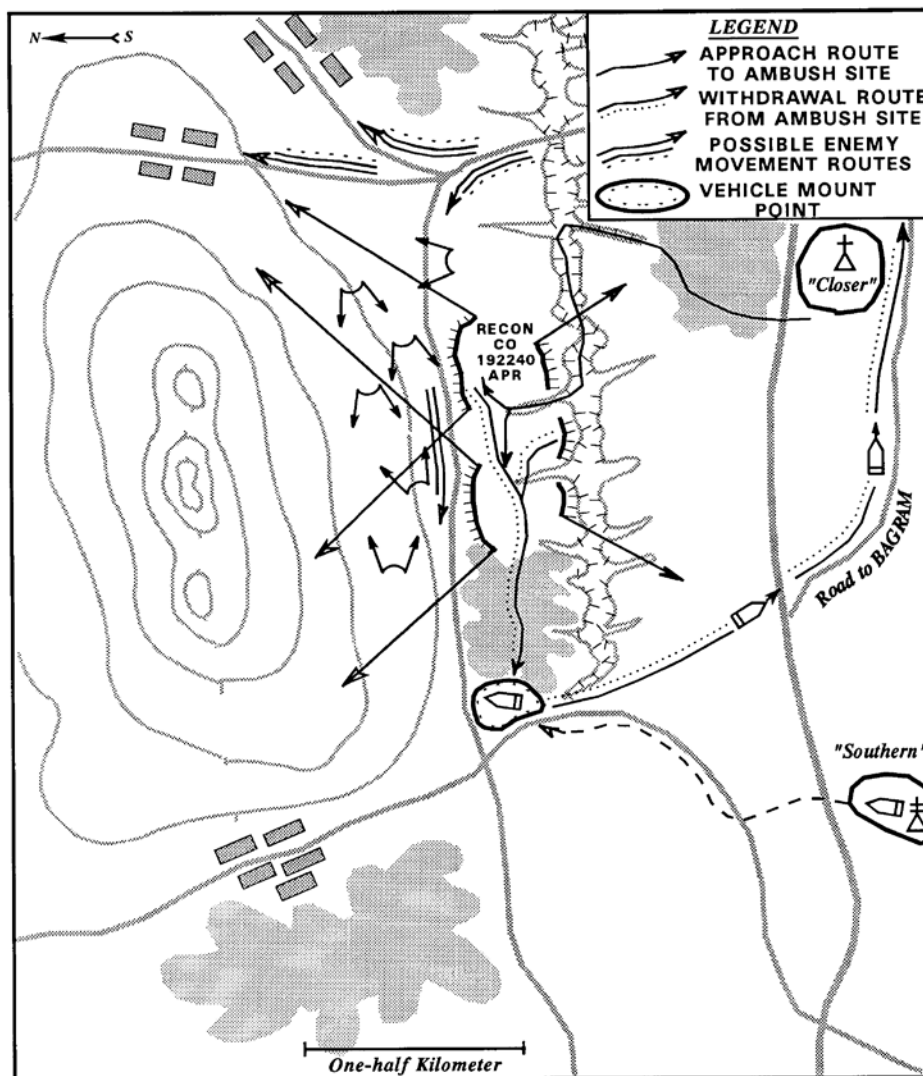
A reinforced recon company conducts an ambush west of Bagram

(Map 10) by Major V. N. Syemin²³

The Republic of Afghanistan announced a period of national reconciliation for January and February 1987. It was officially announced that in the course of one or two years, the Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces would withdraw from Afghanistan. We did not conduct any combat during January and February. This allowed the guerrilla forces to stockpile a large quantity of weapons, ammunition and explosives. A large guerrilla force crossed the Pakistan border and transited the Pandshir valley unmolested. It selected the remote village of Dzhobal'-Ussarazgi in the Mirbachekot Massif as its base station. The village is located in the Bagram green zone. This force conducted missions against the

Kabul-Salang stretch of highway. They would attempt to destroy our convoys, attack our security outposts and observation posts, and shell the Bagram military airfield. During the time that we did not conduct combat, the enemy grew considerably stronger. The number of guerrilla forces and their stockpiles increased dramatically. Their arsenals swelled with weapons, ammunition, communications gear and heavy weapons. Our separate reconnaissance battalion was stationed in Bagram. We were ordered to neutralize the enemy in our AO. Our battalion experienced good results from our planned ambushes during April 1987. We thoroughly prepared our companies for these ambushes. Officers began with sketches and maps of the area. We trained our personnel on ground that was similar to the actual ambush site. We paid a great deal of attention to preparing our weapons and equipment for the upcoming action.

Senior Lieutenant Yu. N. Petrov, the commander of a recon company, received the mission to destroy a caravan which was carrying arms and ammunition for a guerrilla force located in the mountain massif west of Bagram. The company was transported inside PX trucks to the "Closer" [blizh'nyaya] security outpost on the morning of 19 April. This outpost is located on the Kabul-Salang highway. Two days prior, the company's *bronegruppa* had moved to the "Southern" [Yuzhnaya] outpost as part of a reinforced road security sweep. The battalion, which was securing the road from dominant terrain, insured the ambush force's communications with the base camp. The company commander precisely specified the approach march and the order of movement to the ambush site to his group leaders.



Map 10

At 2240 hours, the company reached the ambush site and every group occupied its position. The sapper group mined the probable route of enemy withdrawal.

When the caravan appeared, the company commander let two groups, each with three or four pack animals, pass through the kill zone. When the main body of the caravan was in the kill zone, the company commander requested planned illumination fire from a supporting artillery battalion and gave the signal for his men to open fire. The mine field was in the right place, for the fleeing enemy ran right into it. All the emplaced mines exploded. Within minutes, we destroyed the caravan.

We killed 38 *mujahideen*. The search group captured a large amount of weapons, ammunition, and large-caliber rounds. The sappers blew up the weapons and equipment that we could not carry off. The company successfully withdrew to a mount site where they mounted their BTRs and moved back to the battalion base camp. Two of our soldiers were slightly wounded.

FRUNZE COMMENTARY: This vignette shows the use of artillery to provide battlefield illumination for an ambush. Uninterrupted communication and coordination with the artillery battalion insured the success of the subunits in the ambush. The company commander correctly determined the probable enemy route of withdrawal and selected this site to emplace his minefield.

AUTHOR'S COMMENTARY: Again, reconnaissance forces are used for combat and not reconnaissance. Reconnaissance seems to be a secondary function. Yet, the lack of good tactical reconnaissance seems to have been a weakness of Soviet forces in Afghanistan. Once again, the Soviets use the *bronegruppa* for extrication of the force. The ambush party used a good covered approach through the woods and gully to the ambush site. The question is why the ambush site was located where it was, if the *mujahideen* had three possible routes in the area and the route junction was near at hand. Why didn't the commander put the ambush there, or at least put some observers at the junction and plan some RDM fires on the site? The Soviets established ambush positions on both sides of the woodline. This seems like a good idea. Were all positions fully manned or were they merely sited so that forces could shift between them?

Conducting an ambush on the Yakpay mountain pass

(Map 11) by LTC V. I. Korotkikh²⁴

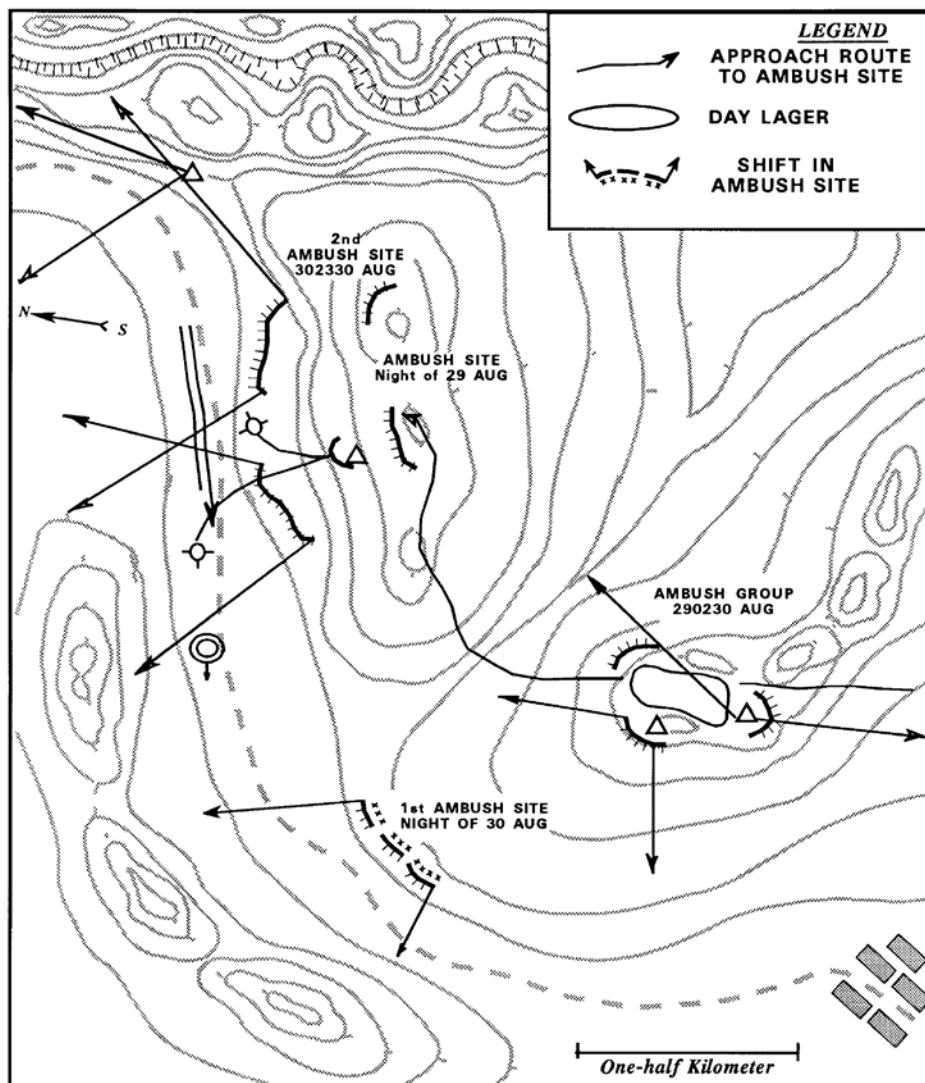
During the spring and summer of 1987, guerrilla forces increased their attacks on government and Soviet forces. To support this combat, the *mujahideen* leaders increased their deliveries of weapons and ammunition from Pakistan. The deliveries would start at the Pakistan border with caravans of some 300 pack animals. Later, these would break into caravans of 15-20 animals which would cross the mountain passes to the guerrilla base camps.

By this time, the *mujahideen* knew Soviet reconnaissance and SPETSNAZ subunits' tactics well and used this knowledge to good advantage. Thus, if their caravan was traveling during the day and was approaching a likely ambush site, the *mujahideen* would block the pass before-hand and hold it for two or three hours until the caravan passed through. The *mujahideen* would post two or three armed lookouts every 200 or 300 meters on the pass. The caravan would then come through in groups of 15-20 pack animals, with an hour between groups, until they had all crossed this dangerous area. If the caravan were to approach a pass at night, they would send out one or two unarmed patrols at twilight. These patrols were disguised as shepherds and often accompanied by children. The caravan would start to move when it became dark. Five to seven men, armed with rifles, would move forward as a reconnaissance patrol. The caravan moved behind this patrol. Drivers, armed with pistols or assault rifles, moved between every two pack animals. A rear security force of two to three men, armed with small arms, moved behind the caravan.

Based on this situation, the high command decided to increase our ambush activity. On 27 August 1987, I was ordered to select a group from my battalion to conduct ambushes in Yakpay Pass in Paktia Province. My commander gave me the order to move out at night to the area of Yakpay Pass and to conduct ambushes there from 28 August to 2 September to destroy a caravan. The distance from our base camp to the pass was twelve kilometers. I was the ambush commander. My 45-man party included twelve scouts from

the recon platoon, 24 air-assault troopers from one of my companies, and up to two men each from my signal platoon, the sapper company and the chemical defense platoon. I also took the surgeon and the battalion's physician's assistant.

At 2030 hours on 28 August 1987, my group moved out for the ambush site. A three-man patrol with night binoculars moved out in front. The main body followed the patrol in a single column. By 0230 hours 29 August, my group finished its ascent and went into a day lager some 1.5 kilometers from the pass. I established two look-out posts. Toward evening, these posts spotted a caravan moving toward the guerrilla base camp region. The caravan settled into a village. At twilight, my ambush group moved rapidly into the pass, took up ambush positions and got ready for combat. However, after we waited until 0200 hours 30 August, I decided that the caravan would not come through the pass that night. I decided to take my force back to the day lager, pick up the material that we had cached there and move further down into the pass.



Map 11

During the day of 30 August, we continued to observe the area. During the afternoon, we spotted 30 armed *mujahideen* moving toward the pass. After they climbed the mountain, they began to establish posts in the pass. It was clear that the stretch of pass I had chosen to ambush would not do. I conferred with the recon platoon leader and then decided to put the ambush in a different place. To do so, it was necessary to move five kilometers in an uninterrupted bound. I called my unit commander on the radio, reported my situation and advised him of my decision.

I ordered my force to move to the new site and we set out at 1800 hours. We reached the new site at 2330 hours. During the next ten-fifteen minutes, I fine-tuned the plan and coordinated the group's actions while the personnel got into firing positions. After a few minutes, a caravan started to move up from the valley. A six-man patrol moved in front of the caravan.

We let it pass. When the caravan was in the kill zone, I gave the signal and my men opened fire. My illumination group fired off parachute flares to illuminate the kill zone. We destroyed the caravan within a few minutes. We killed 14 *mujahideen*, captured two others and seized 15 pack animals loaded with arms, ammunition and medicine. Our sappers blew up the captured ammunition.

I reported our ambush results by radio to my brigade commander. He ordered us to withdraw to an area where our BTRs would pick us up at 0800 hours. We took the prisoners, weapons and documents; linked up with our BTRs at the appointed time; and returned to our unit base camp.

FRUNZE COMMENTARY: In this example, the bravery and initiative displayed by the battalion commander should be noted. He skillfully evaluated the situation, made the decision to change ambush sites, and in a short time organized it in another area. He constituted a special illumination group to provide light so that aimed fire could be placed on the enemy at night.

AUTHOR'S COMMENTARY: The commander took both a surgeon and a medical assistant along on the ambush. The Soviets rediscovered that slight wounds at high altitude can rapidly turn fatal. Medical evacuation by helicopters in these areas was problematic and often wounded soldiers had to be carried to lower altitudes for MEDEVAC helicopters to pick them up. Wounded soldiers sometimes could not survive the hours needed to reach treatment centers.

Contemporary Issues

Since the war, the Russian army has studied their ambush experience in Afghanistan. As Russian forces continue to serve on the Tadjikistan/Afghanistan border, in Chechnya and other mountainous areas, the high-desert ground ambush remains a valid tactic for Russian ground forces. Recently, the Russian military press began debating the proper size and composition of an ambush force.²⁵ The debate questions the exclusive use of reconnaissance and special troops to conduct dismounted ambushes. According to some Russian professionals, ambush forces should be constituted not only from reconnaissance troops, but also from motorized rifle, tank, antitank, artillery, flamethrower, helicopter aviation, fixed-wing aviation, antiaircraft, chemical, electronic, engineer and, in the future, combat robot troops. Ambushes can be antitank, anti-personnel, anti-air, anti-

landing, reconnaissance, phoney and special (electronic, chemical, engineer and combat robots).

The Russians have taken the following lessons from their Afghanistan experience:

First, the ambushing force sometimes encounters a much larger force than anticipated. To avoid disaster, the ambushing force must be able to disengage quickly and withdraw. All ambush sites require local security to prevent the ambushing force from being surprised. Second, weapons systems present in platoon and company ambushes are usually restricted to the organic equipment of that unit. Supplemental tanks, IFVs, self-propelled artillery and self-propelled air-defense guns can usually be incorporated into these ambush sites and hidden from enemy reconnaissance. The effect of the surprise fires of these weapons systems at close range can be devastating on an enemy force in the ambush kill zone.

Third, aviation and artillery planning and close coordination are essential for successful ambush execution. Artillery forward observers and forward air controllers should be included in ambush sites where they can bring increased destruction on the enemy and provide necessary cover during the disengagement and withdrawal of the ambush force. High-precision munitions should be used in support of an ambush.

Fourth, ambush forces need to be able to extricate themselves from encounters with larger enemy forces and to avoid counter-ambush while they withdraw. *Bronegruppa* can be incorporated on the flanks of the ambush where their weapons systems can contribute to the deadliness of the ambush. Further, *bronegruppa* can be located forward of the ambush in a security zone. From these forward positions, *bronegruppa* can engage the enemy and then withdraw, pulling the enemy force into the ambush kill zone. The principle function of the *bronegruppa* in the ambush, however, is to provide for the quick, safe withdrawal of the ambush force.

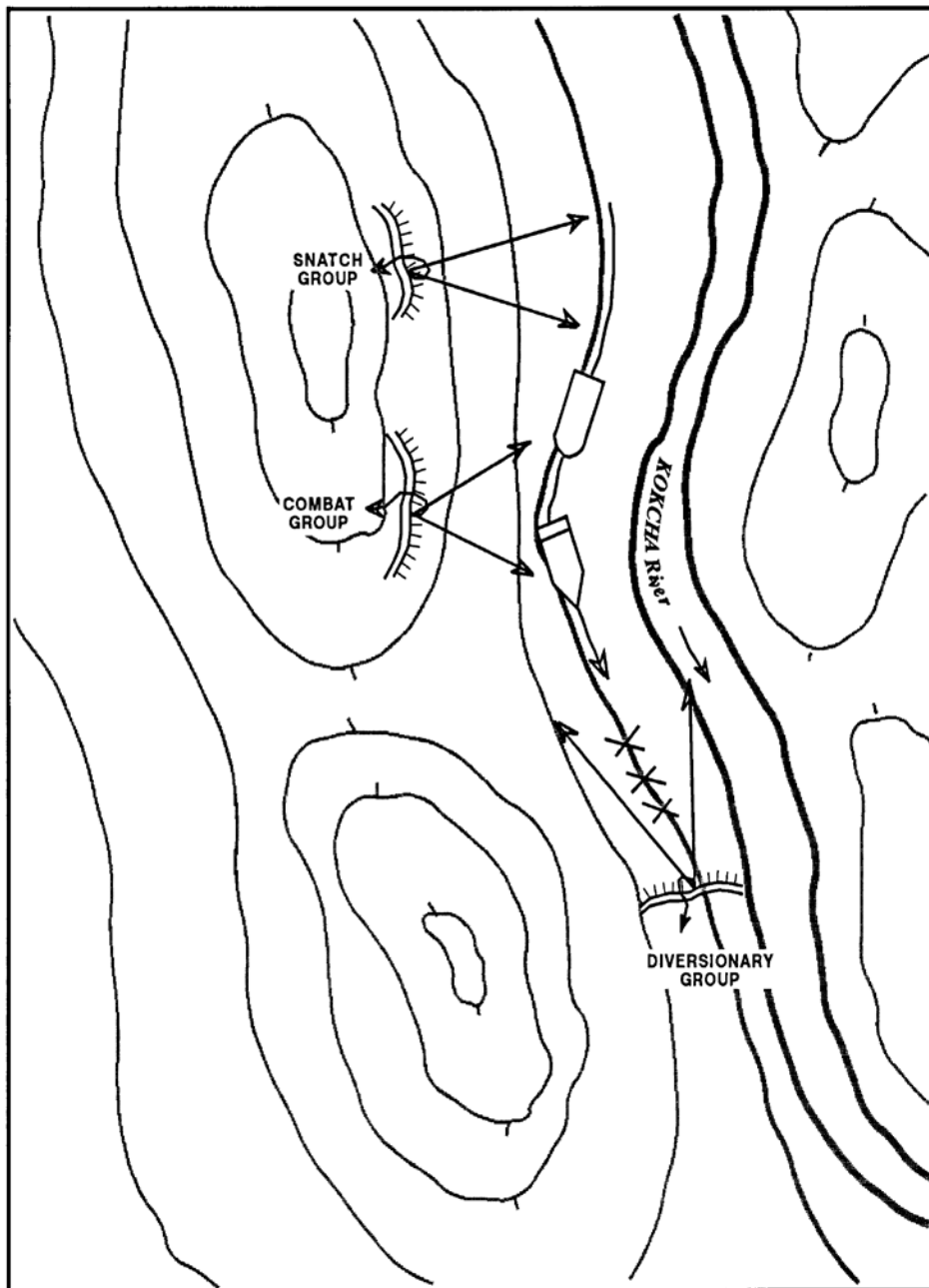
Fifth, The Russians studied the *mujahideen* ambushes (map 12). They characterized *mujahideen* ambushes as having three components in addition to the command group--a diversionary group, a combat group and a snatch group. The diversionary group sealed the exit of the ambush with barricades, rockslides and minefields. The diversionary group would open fire when the Soviet force attempted to clear the obstacle. The Soviet attention would be focused on this diversionary group and the traffic would stack up in the kill zone behind the obstacle. Then, the combat group would open up on the stationary force in the kill zone. The snatch group would move forward to grab prisoners, documents, weapons and munitions. The ambush force would then withdraw over secured paths and roads.

Soviet soldiers caught in an ambush zone would try to drive out of the kill zone. If they could not move, soldiers would usually dismount the personnel carriers and shelter behind the carriers. A favorite *mujahideen* technique was to plant directional mines (claymore-type) on the opposite side of the road facing into the ambush. When the soldiers would shelter behind the carriers, the *mujahideen* would detonate the directional mines and kill the sheltering soldiers.²⁶

The Russians see a place for new technology in the ambush. Infrared sights and viewer, combat robots, remote-controlled weapons and sensors can be used. Scatterable mines, helicopter mobile obstacle construction detachments and controlled minefields can fix the enemy in place while artillery, close air support and remotely piloted vehicles destroy the enemy.

For the more immediate future, the Russians have been studying the United States Army experience in Vietnam and, based on their studies, have proposed the creation and training of combat strike groups [udarno-boevaya gruppa-UBG]. These are three or four man teams armed with automatic weapons with silencers, portable anti-tank grenade launchers, mines and radios. Up to 18 UBGs could be trained in a company and up to 54 UBGs could be trained in a motorized rifle battalion. UBGs would operate at night on enemy-occupied territory (such as the security zone--one the enemy has crossed it. UBGs would set up and change ambush sites two or three times a night and destroy enemy personnel and equipment. In order to increase their survivability, a network of bunkers with stores of ammunition, explosives, food, communications equipment, medicine could be set up in advance. The UBGs could also use these bunkers to rest in during the day. This is a significant departure from Afghanistan where the Soviets only deployed large ambush forces and only against hard intelligence.

In conclusion, the Russians are reviewing their Afghanistan ambush experience and trying to adapt it to their present situation and future wars. Many of their ideas seem relevant to other modern armies who may fight in high desert or in a counter-guerrilla role.



Map 12

Endnotes

1. For information on the tank ambush, see the author's "Absorbing the Initial Attack: The Security Zone in the Contemporary Russian View of Defense", Ft. Leavenworth: FMSO, 1992, Annex B. The Soviets also had air ambushes and air-defense ambushes, but these are not included in this study. [BACK](#)

2. Yu. D. Baskalov et al, *Spravochnik serzhanta motostrelkovykh (tankovykh) voysk* [Handbook for sergeants of the motorized rifle (tank) forces], Moscow: Voenizdat, 1987, 108-109.[BACK](#)
3. For information on the Soviet struggle for their Afghanistan LOC, see the author's "Road Warriors of the Hindu Kush", Ft. Leavenworth: FMSO, 1995 and "Convoy Escort in Guerrilla Country", *The Military Police Journal*, Summer and Fall 1995.[BACK](#)
4. Spetsnaz are "forces of special designation" who are highly-trained, physically-hardened, long-range reconnaissance soldiers. The Soviets deployed eight battalions of these soldiers in Afghanistan. Many of their functions are similar to western commandos and special forces.[BACK](#)
5. These vignettes are from Chapter 6 of the author's *The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Tactics and Tactical Lessons Learned During Their War in Afghanistan* which is scheduled for publication by the National Defense University Press in 1995.[BACK](#)
6. V. I. Pavlenko served in the Soviet Forces in Afghanistan from 1980 through 1982 as a motorized rifle company commander in the 70th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade. He was awarded the medal "For Bravery"--a medal reserved for enlisted men and junior lieutenants.[BACK](#)
7. V. P. Gladishev served in the Soviet Forces in Afghanistan from February 1982 through June 1984. He served as the deputy commander and then the commander of an airborne battalion in the 103rd Airborne Division. He was awarded the "Order of the Red Star".[BACK](#)
8. V. N. Popov served in the 3rd Motorized Rifle Battalion, 122nd Motorized Rifle Regiment, 201st Motorized Rifle Division from February 1984 through March 1986 as the assistant to the chief of staff of a motorized rifle battalion.[BACK](#)
9. The *bronegruppya* (armored group) is a temporary grouping of 4-8 tanks, BMPs or BTRs--or any combination of such vehicles. The BMPs (tracked combat vehicles) or BTRs(wheeled combat vehicles) are deployed without their normally assigned infantry squad on board and fight away from their dismounted troops. The grouping has a significant direct-fire capability and serves as a maneuver reserve.[BACK](#)
10. A. V. Van'yants served in the 70th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade from 1982 to 1984 as a platoon leader and company commander. He had a second tour in Afghanistan from 1987 to 1988 as a battalion chief of staff. He was awarded the "Order of the Red Star".[BACK](#)
11. A. A. Tolkachev served in Afghanistan from May 1983 through May 1985 as an airborne company commander. He was awarded the "Order of the Red Banner".[BACK](#)

12. KHAD were the Secret Police of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. They were patterned after and advised by the Soviet KGB.[BACK](#)

13. The MON (*minna oskolochnaya napravlenogo deistvie*) series of mines are directional, anti-personnel mines similar to the U.S. claymore mine. They can be command detonated or rigged for trip-wire detonation.[BACK](#)

14. The ZIL-130 is a 150 horsepower, 4 x 2 truck which can haul 5.5 tons.[BACK](#)

15. I. V. Solonin served in Afghanistan from 1985 to 1987 as the commander of an airborne battalion.[BACK](#)

16. The Afghan Army 14th Infantry Brigade and the Afghan 4th Sarandoy (Armed Police) Brigade.[BACK](#)

17. A. M. Tangaev served in the 201st Motorized Rifle Division from 1985 to 1987 as the Senior Assistant to the Chief of Division Reconnaissance. He was decorated with the "Order of the Red Star", the order "For Service to the Fatherland in the Armed Forces" Third Class, and the Republic of Afghanistan's "Order of the Star" Second Class.[BACK](#)

18. The systematic tactical exercise [taktiko-stroevoye zanyatie] was a field exercise by elements, in which the event was rehearsed step by step and progressed only as each step was mastered.[BACK](#)

19. V. P. Podvorniy served in the 2nd MRB of the 66th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade from March 1985 through March 1986 as the Senior Assistant to the Chief of the Operations Section of a separate motorized rifle battalion. He was awarded the "Order of the Red Star". An operations section at battalion level is remarkable and must have been a particular feature of this battalion which was garrisoned in Asadabad, Kunar province some 70 kilometers from the brigade headquarters in Jalalabad, Nangahar province.[BACK](#)

20. Usually a MRC has three MRPs. During the first half of the 1980s, a MRC had three MRPs and a machine gun/anti-tank platoon in BTR-mounted units or three MRPs and a machine gun/automatic grenade-launcher platoon in BMP-mounted units. This is not the case here. A separate motorized rifle battalion had four MRPs per MRC as well as other reinforcements.[BACK](#)

21. V. A. Stolbinskiy served in the 70th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade from March 1985 through May 1987 as the commander of an air assault company. He was awarded the "Order of the Red Banner" twice.[BACK](#)

22. 12th MRC, 3rd MRB, 70th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade.[BACK](#)

23. V. N. Syemin served in Afghanistan from 1986 to 1988 as the Chief of Staff of a separate reconnaissance battalion. He was awarded the "Order of the Red Star" twice and the medal "For Valor".[BACK](#)

24. V. I. Korotkikh served in the 56th Separate Air Assault Brigade from 1986 to 1988 as a battalion commander.[BACK](#)

25. N. Utkin, "Zasady v sovremennykh usloviyakh" [Ambushes in modern conditions], *Voyennyy vestnik* [Military herald], August 1993, 20-23. Most of the data for the contemporary issues section is taken from this article.[BACK](#)

26. This technique described to the author in several interviews with *mujahideen* combatants and leaders.[BACK](#)